8
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen

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Contents

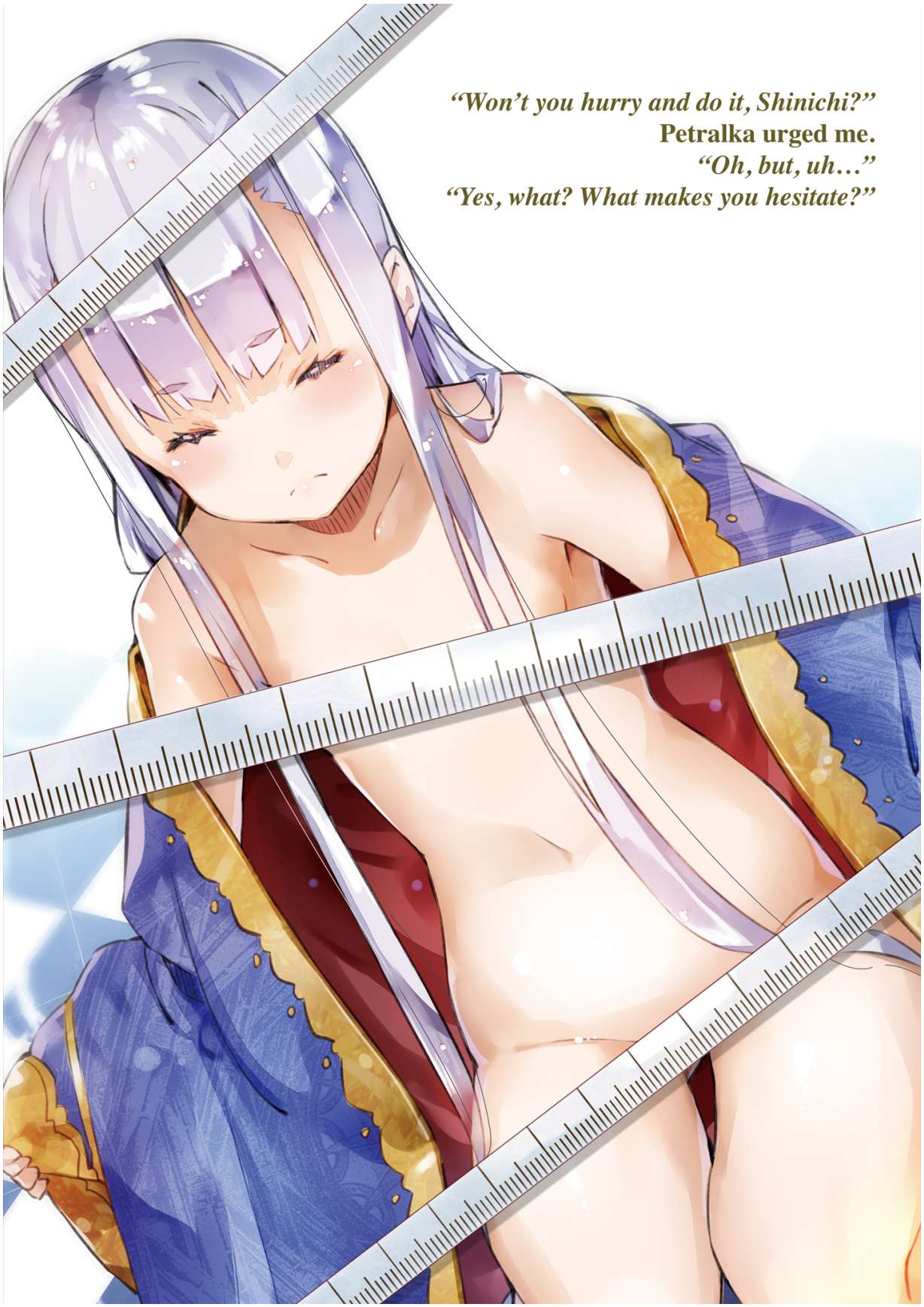
Chapter One: A Royal Replica?

Chapter Two: A Puppet Master?

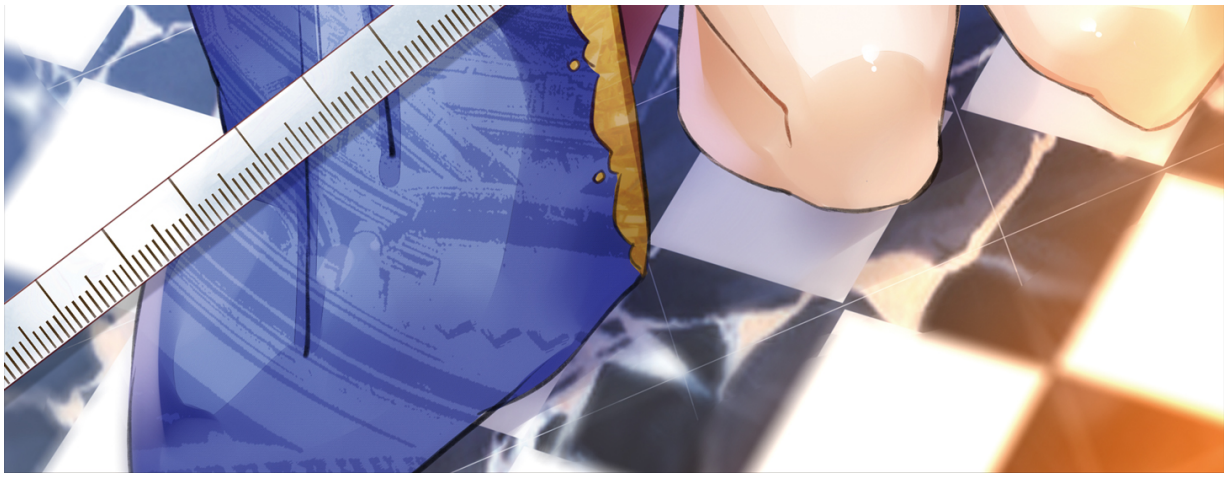
Chapter Three: Her Own Rules?

Chapter Four: Vanishing Magic?

Afterword



“Won’t you hurry and do it, Shinichi?”
Petralka urged me.
“Oh, but, uh…”
“Yes, what? What makes you hesitate?”



"It looks like you've really got it down," I said.
"We're not as good as Lauron, though,"
Romilda said, a little embarrassed.
The figure continued to shamble around
on the desktop while she spoke.
Kanou Shinichi
Koganuma Minori
Myusel Fourant
Romilda Guid

Chapter One: A Royal Replica?

I ran for my life through a murky abyss.

I pumped my legs, dashing as hard as I could. Running was everything.

I had no idea where I was, or what direction I was heading in. Running was absolutely all I knew. Maybe it would have been better just to stand still. But I was terrified by the thought of doing nothing at all.

"Huff... Puff..."

I couldn't keep this up forever, though. It wasn't long before I reached my limit. The fatigue was like a weight on my legs, threatening to make me stumble and fall—but I managed to plant my hands against an earthen wall and at least stay upright. I finally decided to stop for a moment. The instant I did so, I broke out in sweat all over.

"Pant... Pant... Uh... RX-78! RX-78 NT-1! RX-79, RX-79 Ez-8, RX-78GP01, RX-78GP02A, RX-78GP03S, RX-178Mk II, MSZ-006, MSZ-010, RX-93*v*, RX-0, F91...!"

To calm my ragged breathing, I recited the identification numbers of mechs from an anime set in a certain Universal Century. Finally, I had a chance to take in where I was.

I was in a cave... No, more of a tunnel. I was closed in by an overwhelming amount of earth and rock on every side. Obviously I couldn't see the sky, and there were no windows. Thanks to the lights lining the wall at regular intervals, I wasn't trapped in total darkness, but they were barely bigger than Christmas tree lights, so it was all relative. The tunnel in front of and behind me faded quickly into darkness, and I could hardly see anything at all.

Where had I come running from? How had I gotten here? I'd already lost track. I did remember, though, several forks in the road on the way.

Yes: this tunnel was practically a maze. And I was in a lot of trouble...

"Maybe this is what it would be like being trapped in an anthill," I mused by way of escapism. But that quickly led me to imagine giant bugs careering out of the darkness, and I shivered. A massive monster chasing

the protagonist through a tunnel is the most stereotyped of stereotypical scenes.

Stop it. You're jumpy enough just being alone, don't make it worse on yourself.

You've got to calm down, Kanou Shinichi!

I had to chase the frightening thoughts out of my overeager imagination.

I've got it. I'll think about something fun.

Yes! Fantasy. That's what you need at a time like this.

If I'm going to be chased, maybe it could be by, say, a beautiful girl. "Wait for me, Shinichi-kun!" she'd say as she came tearing after me.

I was pretty impressed with the image in my head. Not to brag, but I've been training my imagination for a pretty long time now, and it was capable of some serious feats.

The girl chasing me exclaims, "You'll never get away again! ♪" and grabs at me. Clutch. *Mm, it's a good feeling. It's just adorable the way she looks shyly at the ground. The only downside is that then I can't see the cute little expression on her face.*

I bend down, try to get a look.

That's when she takes the carving knife she was holding behind her back and jams it into my chest, smiling as she looks up and says, "Now we'll be together forever! ♪"

"Hey, that's not how it's supposed to go!" I exclaimed, reining in my rampaging imagination. What was I going to get out of going down the yandere path?

"Eh... I guess it's not going to do me any good, standing here and playing pretend."

I heaved a sigh and looked once more into the inky blackness in front of me.

As I said, when you're lost, it's usually best just to sit tight and wait for someone to come find you... but I wished I could have waited somewhere a bit less claustrophobic. I decided to keep walking until I found something that wasn't a constricting tunnel.

I worked my way forward, taking turns pretty much at random. I had nothing but my intuition to guide me—but eventually, the darkness ahead seemed to lift ever so slightly.

It was a light. And not one of the minimal lights along the wall, but

something large enough to fill an open space and then leak into the tunnel.

"Yes! An exit!" I exclaimed.

To be fair, I didn't know whether it was really an *exit*—whether it led to the surface. But if it at least got me out of this tunnel, that would be a load off my mind.

I burst into the light, grinning with relief and joy.

"Urk..."

The light was stronger than I'd realized; with my eyes used to the darkness, I was almost blinded. I put a hand up to shield my eyes and waited a few seconds for them to adjust.

"Huh...?" I said stupidly.

In front of me was a monster.

It was giant, bizarre. It seemed to be covered in layers of folded steel, like dark-gray armor. It was the size of a small truck and looked awfully heavy. Its back legs were gigantic, and on its front legs grew short but sharp claws.

And were those *wings* folded on its back?

It had a long neck that culminated in a head covered, like its body, in hard skin. Prominently displayed on the head was a big, serrated mouth, like a crocodile's.

It was plenty scary, let me tell you. It was just sitting there, like a boulder, but that was more than enough to terrify this onlooker.

"Oh... sh—"

As I stared at it and gibbered inarticulately, it started to move.

It gave one great shake, then its neck stretched out like a snake.

And then—

"*There* you are!"

"Hagh?!" I screamed when I heard a voice from behind me. A voice that sounded far more cheerful than any voice should have sounded down here.

"We were looking all over for you, Sensei!"

I spun around and saw a diminutive young woman coming up from behind me. Just for a second, I thought she was a child.

But then I recognized her. I ought to—I saw her every day.

She was one of my students.

"Sensei!" she said, looking up at me. "I thought I told you not to go wandering around on your own." She puffed out her cheeks at me, making

her look younger—and cuter—than ever.

She kept her hair cut short (sort of reminding me of a *kappa*), and the hair ornaments she wore above each ear definitely did look good on her. That is to say, she made a pretty elegant impression—until you noticed the work gloves and boots she was wearing, which looked awfully rough, covered in leather. The overall look said *barbarian warrior*. I'd seen her holding a halberd before, and while seeing a small person with a big weapon is perfectly common in manga and anime, it was still kind of surreal to witness it in real life.

“Ah... Mistress,” the terrifying monster said.

No... wait.

On closer inspection, this thing was man-made. It only *looked* like a monster. It was like a big, mobile statue.

It was the False Dragon. The Faldra, for short. A pretend dragon animated with magic.

You could almost call it a robot—something the ever-industrious dwarves had whipped up. I had seen it before, but—huh? The details looked different somehow. I stood there, staring at the thing and mentally comparing it to the way I remembered it.

“Don’t call me that,” the girl said with a slight frown.

The girl’s name was Romilda—Romilda Guld.

You might have guessed that she was my student by the fact that she called me Sensei. She was a dwarf girl, one of the so-called “demi-humans” who live in this world. Her family, the Gulds, are apparently a big name among dwarves, so despite how she might look, she was indeed the kind of person who might normally be called “mistress.”

Also, for some reason she was holding a birdcage in her left hand. Inside, a small, white bird sat placidly on a tree branch.

“Right, v’ry sorry,” a dwarf man said, sticking his head out from behind the Faldra.

All dwarves are short, but unlike the women, who tend to look childish, male dwarves grow beards at a young age, causing all of them to look permanently like grandfathers. That can make it awfully hard to tell how old a dwarf is. Was this guy Romilda’s age? In midlife? I had no idea.

“Anyway, listen, Sensei,” Romilda said, putting her hands on her hips. “We looked *all over* for you. Our underground workshop is awfully big. Even dwarves sometimes get lost when they first come here.”

“...Right. I’m sorry.” All I could do was offer a lame apology. And I thought *I* was supposed to be the authority figure here. Pitiful.

Still, finding someone I recognized in this underground labyrinth of a facility was a huge relief.

My name is Kanou Shinichi.

Now, this is going to sound crazy, but just hear me out.

This alternate world is being targeted—by the Japanese government!

.....

Sorry. I'll try to start at the beginning.

The *beginning* beginning is that a strange "hole" was discovered in Mt. Fuji's "Sea of Trees," the famous suicide forest. It turned out to be what scientists called a hyperspace wormhole, and believe it or not, it led to another world.

Not just any other world, either, but the exact sort of place you would find in a fantasy light novel.

We're talking about a Middle Ages Europe-style nation, complete with an empress who wields absolute authority. Great, as far as it goes, but there's also dragons, and instead of science they have magic, along with all kinds of other stuff that's hard to wrap your head around if you grew up in our world.

This is definitely the biggest discovery of the century—no, probably in of all human history.

But the Japanese government never told the rest of the world about it. They stamped it *Top Secret* and launched their own investigation of the place. They didn't want anyone else to know that Japan was connected to a new world.

I mean it is, after all, a totally new place. It's full of life-forms we've never experienced, cultures and resources we know nothing about. If Japan could keep this all to itself—more to the point, if it could hoodwink the inhabitants of this place into giving Japan control of all this—then the country stood to make a *lot* of money. So Japan's VIPs set out to initiate exchange with the country on the far side of the wormhole—the Holy Eldant Empire—with yen signs in their eyes.

Here's the upshot: they were able to make overtures, but they never really became friends with this place.

The wormhole, allegedly, isn't very stable, and it's small to boot, so bringing through a large amount of anything all at once isn't feasible. Not to mention that any major movement of resources would catch the attention of other Earthly countries. Hence Japan found itself limited to small items and a constrained number of personnel. That led to the decision to try to gain

the Eldant Empire's trust based on cultural exchange.

And cultural exchange, in Japan, means traditional culture. So they tried pottery, they tried textiles, they tried whatever was refined and elegant and uniquely Japanese, but the people of this new world just weren't biting. Who knows—maybe it was just the climate? Whatever it was, the Eldant people weren't very interested in anything Japan had to offer.

The Japanese government, getting desperate, started casting around for anything that might get the new country's attention, traditional or not. In the end, the thing that got the best reaction, if you can believe it, was otaku-esque entertainments—manga, anime, games, that sort of thing.

The government immediately made that stuff the core of its exchange.

The only problem was—they didn't have anyone who knew quite what they were doing when it came to this stuff. From time immemorial, the mix of bureaucrats and popular entertainment has virtually always meant a lot of wasted money and almost no visible effect. These programs are all too often the very epitome of wasteful government spending.

And to their credit, maybe they knew it, because the suits looked for someone other than themselves to run the show.

That's right: they decided to get a citizen who knew something about otaku culture to come over and coordinate things. Considering how secret this all was, they felt it would be best if this citizen were someone who could disappear off the face of the earth without causing much of a stir.

On those criteria, they picked... me.

In the beginning, I swallowed the "cultural exchange" talk hook, line, and sinker. I was eager to use my otaku knowledge to build bridges between Japan and the Eldant Empire, to bring the people of this other world entertaining books and shows. "Otaku evangelism"? I was all over it.

But it turned out they were just using a naïve, stupid kid for their own ends.

What the Japanese government actually wanted was to *invade* this other world using culture.

It was something like what had frequently happened with religion in Earth's past: you didn't have to have tons of resources or armies of people; there was a quiet, economical way to approach the issue—invading people's hearts. The idea was to soften them up using Japanese entertainment products so that they would then listen to what we wanted. The most subtle

invasion of all.

When I learned all this, I rebelled against the Japanese government. They responded by sending a special ops squad to eliminate me, then sending someone to replace me, and... Well, let's just say a lot has happened. But with the support of the people I've grown close to in this other world, I've managed to survive all the infighting to reach this point.

I won't say I never miss my life in Japan. I do, sometimes. But still, I've somehow managed to get to where I am, no longer an invader, but a true evangelist, still preaching the good word of otaku culture in this strange new world.

Romilda ushered me into another room. We were still in an underground workshop, so there was still earth and rock on every side, but the room itself was so big you could have held an impromptu soccer game in it. It was filled with diminutive figures—dwarves bustling this way and that. I could hardly believe how isolated I'd felt just a few minutes earlier; this place felt packed.

"Shinichi-kun!" Someone in the room, seeing us come in, rushed over to me. "I was so worried."

A bespectacled young woman put her hands on her hips as she stopped in front of me.

Koganuma Minori-san.

I've never specifically asked how old she is, but I'd have to guess early twenties. Maybe I'm not one to talk, only being in my teens myself, but she had a baby face that still had a youthful roundness and softness in places; add to that her large-ish, round glasses, and the overall effect was cute—very cute. She kept her long black hair swept up in a bun that wouldn't interfere with her work, but that had a *kawaii*-ness all its own.

Then again, her uniform-clad bust made itself inescapably evident... Now that's a gap you could get seriously moe over.

Minori-san was our resident WAC, a member of the JSDF—and my bodyguard.

"I turn around and you're gone? You scared me to death." She sounded

half relieved and half scolding.

"I'm very sorry," I said, deciding that excuses wouldn't be worth much right now.

"You just got so excited at the whole idea of a giant underground facility," someone else said instead, "that you started taking pictures of all the neat stuff with your cell phone, and before you knew it everyone was gone. Am I right?"

This teasing assessment came from someone with long hair and a Gothic Lolita outfit, a striking beauty. It seemed like they'd deduced what had happened just by glancing at me.

This person's name was Ayasaki Hikaru-san.

Things always seemed... how do I put this? *Different* around Hikaru-san.

The Japanese government had originally sent Hikaru-san as my replacement—versed in otaku culture, of course, but also a serious cosplayer, with the special air of someone who spends their time making it look like characters have jumped right out of the pages or screens of manga, anime, or games. Hikaru-san specialized in gorgeous young female characters; this was the sort of person you looked at and thought, *I'll bet they don't even go to the bathroom*. Totally pure.

There was just one eensy-weensy little catch to Hikaru-san's hobby, which was that despite all the great girl characters Hikaru-san portrayed, *he* was a guy. A cross-dresser, if you will.

"...Very sorry."

He was also exactly right about what had happened, and all I could do was apologize again.

"Well, at least we found you again," Minori-san said, "thanks to Romilda and her friends. Thank you all so much." The dwarves bowed.

"Not at all," Romilda said with a slightly frantic wave of her hand. "It's no big deal. As complicated as this place is, everyone gets lost sometimes. Even dwarves, when they're new here."

It was nice of her to cover for me like that.

What a sweet girl... Sensei is very happy.

Meanwhile, the bird Romilda was holding began to protest the waving with little chirps.

"Hey," I said, "I've been wondering—why have you been carrying that the whole time we've been down here?"

Romilda looked confused at first. “Carrying what? Oh, you mean this?” She held up the birdcage.

She certainly didn’t show up to school with a birdcage every day. That meant she had brought it along specifically for our trip to this underground facility.

“You have to bring one of these when you come down here,” she said. “It lets you know if you get too close to anything dangerous.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Minori-san said with a nod.

“It does?” I asked.

“Shinichi-kun, you’ve never heard of this?” Minori-san smirked a little. “Miners always used to take canaries into the coal mines with them. I mean in Japan, not Eldant. Down into the tunnels. Dangerous gases would affect the bird before they hurt humans, so if anything happened to the canary, it was a sign there was trouble. A living gas detector, sort of.”

“Ahh...” Come to think of it, I *had* heard something like that before, somewhere.

“This workshop has been around for more than a generation, so there shouldn’t be anything too dangerous around here,” Romilda volunteered. “But there’s still expansion work taking place in some of the far reaches, so we’re supposed to keep birds with us. You remember the little hut at the entrance? That’s where they live.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Us dwarves are all used to being in underground workshops like this, but you can never assume it’s safe. Mining and manufacturing use large-scale magic that can cause accidents. We have lots of stuff ready to go in case of an emergency.” Romilda smiled. “Like magical bombs.”

“Bombs?!”

That sounded a lot more likely to *cause* an emergency than solve one, in my opinion. I could see using something like that to open a new tunnel, for example, but once you were underground, setting off a magical bomb seemed like an invitation to be buried alive.

“You have to fight rampaging sprites with other sprites,” Romilda explained.

“Like bombing out a fire, I guess...” I said.

Even back on Earth, there were things you couldn’t fight just by throwing water or fire retardant on them, like grease fires. Sometimes you

literally used a bomb to put out the flames. The wind created by the explosion would douse the fire while also blowing away fuel the inferno might use to continue to grow.

"To be fair, we've never had a serious enough accident here to have to use the magical bombs," Romilda said with a shrug.

"Best to be ready, though. Forewarned is forearmed. Or... fore-prepared, or... something."

"Right."

"This place is seriously huge, though," I said, trying to picture the scale of the underground area based on the tunnels I'd gotten lost in. They called this place a workshop, but it seemed big enough to be a city. Romilda said it'd been operating for more than a generation, and they were still building it out...

"We're the biggest workshop in Marinos," she told us proudly. The owner of the facility—the "boss" who oversaw all the dwarves working down here—was her father. That was why she could talk about *we*. "We make everything from weapons and armor to candlestick holders and eating utensils."

"Huh, wow..."

Marinos was the capital of the Eldant Empire, and the way Romilda talked made it sound like there were other, smaller workshops around here as well. I knew Eldant Castle had been built by hollowing out a mountain; the rock was probably plenty thick around here. But still, this was incredible.

"Anyway," Romilda said, turning aside, "this is what I wanted you to see, Sensei."

I was down here in the first place because Romilda had invited me to see something in this underground workshop. And there it was, lined up along the wall on the far end of this big room.

A whole collection of strangely shaped things. Ten of them, at least.

They were just like the thing I'd seen earlier—big bodies covered in tough-looking, dark-gray plates. Four extremities, a head, wings, a tail... They were obviously modeled on a living thing, but they had none of the softness of a real living creature.

"The Faldras..." Romilda said.

Faldras—short for false dragons. As you might guess from the name,

these things were designed by the dwarves to look like dragons. Just as big as the real thing. Romilda's dad made the first one, at our request, for a movie we were producing at the time. Originally, it only had to look like a dragon—but then Romilda and her elf buddy Loek, perhaps inspired by all the otaku stuff they were seeing from Japan, went ahead and used magic to make the Faldra move. It even transformed, like some sort of mecha.

"Don't tell me," I said. "Are these all...?"

I thought of how the Faldra I'd encountered in the other room had moved.

"Yep!" Romilda said.

Apparently, all the Faldras here were mechs.

"Geez, look at 'em all."

One Faldra by itself was imposing enough; ten of them lined up together was I'll-do-whatever-you-want territory. It felt like I had wandered into a nest of monsters I knew nothing about.

It was perfectly natural that the details should look different. The other one I had seen was a prototype, while these were the mass-production models.

"We'd like to make some improvements, and we want our teachers' opinions."

"Why ours?" They already looked finished to me. What kind of opinion could I possibly offer? "I mean, I'm happy to share my thoughts, but..."

"What exactly are you planning to do with all these?" Minori-san asked, sounding a bit wary herself.

"Dad thought maybe we could make a bunch of them and, you know, have the army use them."

"The army... You mean they're weapons." My eyes were wide.

"We *did* use one once."

"We did? Oh, you mean when I was kidnapped by Bahairam."

When I had been kidnapped by the Kingdom of Bahairam, Romilda and several of my friends had come to the rescue aboard the Faldra—which had then gone toe-to-toe with a Puppet Wyrm, Bahairam's brand-new "living weapon." Although to be fair, our mech ended up running out of magic before the end of the fight. It was Minori-san who finished the job, using an RPG she'd carted along.

Still and all, though, the Faldra had certainly proved its ability as a

fighting machine.

And hey, they didn't have to use it for fighting. It could lift heavy objects or dig trenches, transport materials—there were all sorts of uses for something like that. I mean, back on Earth, we were all about building robots because of all the things you can do with them, right?

"But that was really something you and Loek achieved together, right?"

Dwarves are superb users of magic dealing with ores and minerals. That's why they could use magic to move the Faldra, which was essentially a big lump of metal. But when it came to the wings, getting it airborne and everything, that was beyond them. That was when they needed the help of wind magic, which is the specialty of the elves.

"Well, uh..." Romilda didn't quite look at me. She puffed out her cheeks a bit, annoyed. "I guess that disgusting, pervy elf did help me out a little. I can't deny that."

"Worried about the past, Romilda?" I smiled. "There's no real reason for the elves and dwarves not to get along now, is there?"

If fantasy stories the world over have taught us anything, it's that elves and dwarves don't like each other very much—and that seemed to hold true in Eldant as well. In the classroom of the otaku training center—er, school—that I ran, this was exemplified by the "young mistress" Romilda and the "young master" Loek, leaders among the dwarves and the elves in my class, respectively.

They fought, and fought often. But it didn't seem like they hated each other from the bottoms of their hearts—they proved that when they worked together to come rescue me. And recently, I thought I'd been seeing them with each other quite a bit.

The origin of this animosity between elves and dwarves existed only in legend now—more to the point, it stretched back before humans had put themselves at the top of a centralized, authoritarian nation-state. In other words, elves and dwarves, especially younger ones like Loek and Romilda, had no real reason to go out of their way to get into arguments with each other.

"How about we stop worrying about how I feel about elves and think about how that stupid idiot—" Then Romilda stopped and let out a sigh. "Well, Sensei, you're not wrong that the whole fighting-with-elves thing is more like heritage now than anything. Even my dad is hoping that working

with elves on this Faldra project might raise people's opinions of demi-humans all around."

Humans were capable of using wind and earth magic, yes, but only to a pretty limited extent. When it came to the sort of complicated, precise magic required to control a Faldra, you couldn't beat elves and dwarves working together.

As things stood, though, elves and dwarves were both just grouped under the catch-all term "demi-humans," and were considered a rung below humans on the social ladder of the Holy Eldant Empire.

The difference in status wasn't absolute, and such people had several ways of rising in the world.

The simplest was to join the military—do something noteworthy, and you might even be respected as much as a human.

"Hence the weaponry, huh..."

Okay, so the word *weaponry* did sound a bit like trouble waiting to happen. But I thought it was a good thing the dwarves were specifically trying to move themselves up in the world. And if it happened to help bring the elves and dwarves closer, so much the better.

"Anyway," I said, "I can definitely see how you could get some use out of a Faldra, especially for defense."

"Yeah, right?" Minori-san said with a sly grin. Who would know more about using weaponry for defense then a member of the JSDF?

"So, Sensei," Romilda said. "You have any thoughts or comments or anything?"

"Thoughts, huh..." I crossed my arms and looked up at the Faldras. "When it comes to robots, to mobile weapons platforms, *armored* is the word."

"*Are-mored*?"

"You know, reinforced this and strengthened that. If you're gonna have a second cour, you need to make some changes! Keep things from lagging midseason, right?"

"Uh..."

Apparently I was talking over Romilda's head. She had seen some robot anime, but she probably hadn't really watched it from the perspective of what you do in a second season, or how new robots show up because sponsors want to sell toys, that sort of thing. Most of the anime and

tokusatsu stuff we had at the school was on DVD; it didn't have commercial breaks. These kids might not even have known what a sponsor was.

"Or, you know, Mk II."

"*Mark Too*?"

"A new version, the original concept polished to a sharp point! Like, now it can fly or something. Stick on a bunch of Vernier thrusters or apogee kick motors or whatever! More tech means more eyeballs!"

"Er, Sensei, the Faldra can already fly..."

"Oh, that's right."

"Shinichi-kun," Minori-san said with a sigh, "can we at least *try* to be serious, for her sake?"

"...Yes, ma'am."

Sorry. My fault.

I kind of forgot we weren't selling viewers plastic models of the hero robot.

"But we have been talking about adding transformation capabilities," Romilda said. "So it can fight in humanoid form like before!"

"Ooh, me like!" Every man dreams of a humanoid robot. Mm-hmm. "Plus its combat power'll go up!"

That's how transforming mechas work, right? The flying form is for mobility, and the humanoid form is for making the most of its fighting prowess.

But then Minori-san said coolly, "I'm not so sure about that. The first time you do it, it'll probably surprise the opponent enough that they might not attack until you're done transforming. But after that, they'll probably hit you in the middle of the transition."

"As if!" I exclaimed. "It's against the rules to hit a robot while it's transforming!"

"Whose rules?" Minori-san said with a grim smile. "An opponent who deliberately puts themselves in a completely defenseless position like that is just begging to be destroyed."

"I see. No good, huh?" Romilda's shoulders slumped.

"Well, it depends on how you're transporting them," Minori-san said. "Think of them like tanks. As long as they don't rush to the battlefield in flight form and then try to transform right in front of the enemy, it'd be

okay.”

“Oh, yeah, I see.”

Even tanks didn’t get to the battlefield under their own power; they were often loaded on trailers to move them around. Really, tank treads were designed to grip uneven surfaces. A normal wheeled vehicle would generally be more effective on a proper road.

But then, of course, when you brought tanks to a combat zone by trailer, you didn’t sit there and unload them right in front of the enemy. You had to decide how to handle things based on the situation.

“I think there’s a more pertinent question,” Minori-san said, “of whether humanoid weapons are even really practical.”

“Gosh, Minori-san, you go right for the jugular...”

“Weapons systems don’t have jugulars.”

“In the image of humanity, in the image of God—if you wish to know what drives these impulses, seek within the human heart.”

This oddly chuunibyou-esque line came from Hikaru-san, who had simply been looking at the Faldra and listening to our conversation up to that point. As usual, his declarations were hard to parse, at best. But he came at things from a perspective I didn’t usually take, so I tried not to hold it against him.

“What are you talking about?”

“I think of humanoid robots in anime and manga as essentially an extension of sculpture or carvings. Making gods who look like men, humans’ throbbing desire to leave images of themselves behind—all of it goes back to human psychology.” Hikaru-san spread his arms wide in a theatrical gesture. It was overdone, for sure, but it fit so well with his personality that I found it hard to be snarky about it.

“Think about the golem in Hebrew mythology, among others—whenever these things are used as weapons, it’s about more than just simple destructive power, or even efficiency of labor. It harkens back to an instinctual fear people have of things that look like themselves but are much bigger.”

“Oh, I get it,” Minori-san said. “The best way to deter an attack is through intimidation.”

“I’m glad you know what he’s talking about, because I’m not sure I do,” I said.

Hikaru-san sighed and explained, “If the people of this world were suddenly confronted with a tank or something, they probably wouldn’t be as frightened as you or I would. We know how much firepower a machine like that has, so we know to be afraid of it. But think about what people in this world know. They know how big a person is supposed to be. So when they see something that *looks* human, but is vastly bigger than they expect, they’ll instinctively be afraid of it. Long before they have any idea how powerful it is in battle, see?”

“Ahh...”

Come to think of it, I felt like I had heard a similar explanation in some old robot anime I’d seen a long time ago. Something about how the effect of humanoid weaponry had as much to do with its psychological impact on people who saw it as its actual combat power.

“You’re saying that instead of using it as an actual weapon, you have it act sort of like police equipment.”

If the Faldra could be effective just by standing there, without actually having to injure or kill anybody, I thought that would be the best of all worlds.

“But if that’s how you’re going to use it, wouldn’t it be better to have it look as human as possible?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Hikaru-san said.

“Sort of like it was about to *attack*,” I said, thinking of a manga that shall remain nameless.

Just picturing some titanic creature having a little peek at your house from across the street was beyond scary. It was more like... reality being pulled out from underneath you. Actually, maybe that was why they made Ult**man kind of featureless and symbolic.

“I think all that would be less scary than sort of... sickening,” Hikaru-san said. “I don’t know much about the magic around here yet, but trying to get an expression to work—to move the eyes and lips and everything—seems like it would be a lot of trouble. But then if you tried and didn’t get it right, I think it would make the thing look more artificial and less scary.”

“This is tough,” I said.

As we talked, I took a few steps forward to get a better look at the mass-production Faldras.

They were lined up side by side, and I guess they weren’t finished yet,

because two or three dwarves were working away on each of them. It's not easy to guess the age of a dwarf guy, but it seemed like the workers ran the gamut between the young and the old. Grizzled laborers made up the bulk of the ranks, obviously, but once in a while it was possible to spot someone who clearly looked like a young woman.

Then I stopped, puzzled, my attention drawn by one particular dwarf.

Or rather, not the dwarf so much as the work they were doing.

I could see short, neat gray hair peeking out from under the black hat covering the worker's head. At first it looked like a guy, but the structure of the facial features led me to think it was probably a woman.

Like Romilda, her outfit was relatively revealing—short tank top and hot pants, midriff completely exposed—but her skin tone was darker, and her toned, muscled limbs kept the effect from being too erotic.

One of the Faldras sat placidly before her, and I could see clay figurines working both inside and outside it.

These were magical puppets the dwarves could create. The two outside were on the large side, while in between the slats of the armor I could see one within. They were all moving at once, all working. The one inside must have been fiddling with the Faldra's internal equipment. The girl was the only person near this Faldra. Meaning...

Is she controlling all three of those dolls at once?

All three of them different sizes, and all doing different tasks—simultaneously.

I wasn't sure, but that seemed awfully difficult.

"What are you looking at?" Hikaru-san had noticed me staring.

"Oh, just..." I pointed out the girl and the figures she was controlling.

"Ahh," Hikaru-san said, looking over himself. "You saw a cute loli girl, so you were sexing her up with your eyes."

"Hey, don't say that where people could hear you!"

Though I don't deny she was cute!

I mean, her face, sure, but the way the area around her belly—no! No no no no! Different subject!

“You see how she’s controlling three of those clay dolls at once?” I said.

“Huh, yeah, she’s good.” Hikaru-san at least had the good grace to be genuinely impressed.

My understanding was that controlling even one clay doll wasn’t an easy task. It wasn’t like you just created the creature, and then it did work for you on its own. You had to pay attention to and dictate its every move. That meant that controlling two clay dolls at once would be like trying to write totally different letters with your right and left hands. It was borderline impossible for most people, even for dwarves.

And she had three of them going at once. I couldn’t imagine how she was controlling them.

“What’s going on?” Minori-san and Romilda glanced over at us.

“Hey, Romilda,” I said. “Controlling three clay dolls at once—that would be pretty hard, right?”

Romilda looked like she thought this question came out of the blue. “Er... Yeah.” Then she saw who I was looking at and nodded. “It’s not normally possible. I certainly can’t do it. That girl—Lauron Selioz is her name—she’s an exception. You might even say she’s a genius, at least when it comes to controlling clay dolls.”

Romilda sounded as pleased as if she were talking about herself.

“Even experienced clay-doll users can almost never control three at once—and she’s only my age. Most of us, even if we can make that many dolls, we don’t have anything like Lauron’s precision. Plus she’s a hard worker.”

“Wow...”

And that was coming from the daughter of the guy who ran this workshop. I guess this Lauron girl really was something else.

My admiring ruminations were interrupted by a voice shouting Lauron’s name.

“Hey, Lauron!”

I saw a male dwarf bounding toward her. Lauron, though, didn’t seem to react.

“Lauron!” he shouted right in her ear, and then finally, as if waking from a dream, she blinked and looked over at him.

“Yes...?”

“I told you to leave that for later and do *that* one, over there!”

“Er... But... the schedule for today says this one...”

“Don’t you remember? I said this morning: Radol’s been out sick since yesterday, and we’re running behind on the exterior of prototype number 3! Go help Garaham!”

“But...”

“No buts! Don’t I keep telling you to be more flexible?!”

Lauron was pretty much fixated on the work in front of her throughout the conversation, and the other dwarf didn’t seem happy about it. She muttered a few more things that seemed like excuses, but finally she dragged herself over to the other Faldra and got to work.

Our group watched the exchange silently.

“Uhh... Look,” Romilda said with a strained smile. “Sh-She’s normally really awesome, I swear. Today someone got a little angry at her, that’s all. It’s just...”

“No, uh, I get it,” I said, nodding. “She does look really sharp.”

Long story short, apparently she was a master among dwarves when it came to controlling clay dolls, but maybe not when it came to compromising. Well, it was hardly unusual for geniuses to be very specialized.

“So, about your thoughts or ideas...”

“Oh, right.”

Prompted by Romilda, we put aside any concerns about the girl called Lauron and resumed our walk through the workshop, discussing the mass-production Faldras and the best ways to improve them.

The Holy Eldant Empire.

That’s the complete, official name of the place where I’m living now. It’s connected to Japan via a hyperspace tunnel known as the “hole.” (Because I was in a drug-induced sleep when they dragged me over here, I don’t know where in Eldant the hole is.)

I’m living in the country’s capital, Marinos, as general manager of an other-world-first entertainment company. The area around Marinos is rich with natural beauty; the plains are peppered with forests and little hills. And sitting right in the middle of it all—right in the middle of the Eldant

Empire, really—is a castle town.

It all looks pretty Middle-Ages European. There are big houses and small ones all packed in together, and the main roads are lined with flagstone; for a kid who never so much as went on an overseas vacation, this place feels extraordinary enough to last me a lifetime.

And the most extraordinary thing of all has to be Holy Eldant Castle.

It's big. I mean *huge*. That's the first thing you notice. It looks less like a building than a geographical feature, like a mountain. It *was* a mountain, in fact, originally: they hollowed it out to make the castle. It's bigger than any building I've ever been in; you feel impossibly small just standing near it.

Then you go through the front gate (big enough to make you think maybe it's for giant robots), and... well, I've been there a lot, but it makes me nervous every time.

"And that's all I have to report."

We were in one of the audience chambers deep inside that very castle; in other words, in one of the rooms reserved for meeting with Her Majesty the Empress, the owner of the building. We were in the smallest of the audience chambers, but it still would have been big enough for ten or twenty people to comfortably hold a meeting.

The three of us stood in a single row.

A little bit in front of and just above us, the empress sat on her throne.

A silver-haired, lovely little g—I mean, young woman. The color of her hair and eyes, and even the cast of her facial features, clearly communicated that she was swimming in a different gene pool from the Japanese. To put it bluntly, she was absolutely beautiful, the very picture of a fantasy princess. She looked like the work of a master dollmaker, and her miraculous cuteness made men and women alike want to give her a big hug.

Of course, if you tried to do that to her, heads would roll... literally.

This was Her Majesty the Empress, Petralka an Eldant III.

She practically looked like a preteen—heck, she wouldn't have seemed out of place wearing an elementary-schooler's backpack—but she was, I was told, sixteen years old. She was also very touchy about how young she looked, and you could get in major trouble by pointing it out.

"Mm. Fine work."

Petralka nodded graciously when I finished my report about the activities of our company, Amutech, and the associated school.

Up to this point, though, I'd been giving a more or less formal report. After that, we usually slipped into a more relaxed chat.

"Let's see, what else was there... Oh, I know. I went to one of the dwarves' underground workshops the other day. Romilda's place. Guld Foundry, I guess."

"Oh...?" Petralka nodded, interested. "That's the largest workshop in Marinos. We are sure it's quite impressive. But why so suddenly?"

"Romilda said she wanted to show me something. You know the Faldra? I guess the dwarves have been working on an upgrade."

"Hmm...?"

"They're prototyping a mass-production model now. They think that if the things get into military use, it'll be a new way for the dwarves and the elves to help the empire."

"I see..." The affirmation and the nod came, not from Petralka, but from the young man standing beside her throne. He had long, silver hair, just like her, and his attractive features showed a certain resemblance, too. It was enough to make you think they were related by blood—perhaps even that they were brother and sister.

This young man was the beautiful knight, Minister Garius en Cordobal. He *was* a relative of Petralka's, and he held an important position as an imperial advisor as well. His designation as knight referred to his actual job, and was separate from the title of nobility—he was the commander-in-chief of the entire military. And from what I had heard, he was as accomplished with the pen as with the sword.

He looked like he had jumped right out of some otome game, an over-spec'd hunk of a perfect man who would get any girl excited... The only thing being, *he* didn't seem very interested in that sort of thing. I think he preferred boys over flowers, if you know what I mean.

I sometimes caught him shooting weird little looks in my direction: I couldn't let my guard down. Not that he seemed like a bad person, but that didn't mean I wanted rose petals flying around us or whatever. Minori-san, who had a BL fixation and *did* want to see us like that, made a mountain out of every molehill she could find, and I wished she would leave us alone.

Anyway...

"This could be interesting," Garius said, tapping a finger against his chin. "The military considers it a matter of utmost importance to secure

combat power matching that demonstrated by Bahairam's puppet drake. Your Faldra has at least proven itself in that regard."

Garius was talking about the same thing that had come up in my talk with Romilda the day before—the way the Faldra had fought with the puppet drake in Bahairam when Romilda and the others came to rescue me.

"Yeah, but it stopped moving halfway through."

Dragons, apparently, were part sprite themselves—in other words, they metabolized magic. Use magic near a dragon, and the critter would just absorb it, and your spell would fizzle out. It also meant that the magic-powered Faldra ran out of juice in a hurry when it was at close quarters with a real dragon. And we happened to learn this right in the middle of an actual battle, which wasn't fun.

"It would be useful even as a deterrent," Garius said. "The fact that a Faldra once defeated a puppet drake would carry considerable weight."

Ahh. I knew this guy was smart.

He wasn't necessarily thinking about winning a toe-to-toe contest. All they needed was something that put Bahairam on notice: *Hey, guys! We're not afraid of that fancy new weapon of yours—because we've got* this*!* That might be enough to make them think twice about taking any military action, and that would justify the Faldras all by itself.

It didn't seem like Eldant had traditionally used these kinds of tactics—what you might almost call psychological warfare. But Garius, in his own way, seemed to be figuring them out as he worked with us.

"Those dwarves are quite clever, aren't they?"

The note of agreement was sounded by another man, standing on Petralka's other side—an older man with white hair and a white beard. Prime Minister Zahar.

Look, I know what you're thinking. The moment you hear the words "Prime Minister," you picture a scheming fox who wants to take over the kingdom, or some intimidating final-boss type, or a clever plotter who prefers to run things from the shadows... Not a good impression.

I understand. But it's just a product of too many games and anime and manga—a bias, if you will. As a matter of fact, Prime Minister Zahar came across like a hard-working middle manager. He had single-handedly shattered my preconceptions about men of his station.

He was Petralka's advisor on political and economic matters, and also

helped educate the still-young ruler. He was sort of like a grandfather to her.

When the Japanese made first contact, it was Zahar who chose to engage them in dialogue rather than immediately trying to fight. So as much as he might look like a frail old man, he was actually intelligent and rational.

"It would work on more than just Bahairam," he said. "It might help cow rebels within our own country."

As we've discussed, the Faldra looked like a dragon, even if it was a fake one. It even had a specially crafted "skin" of cloth that made it, from a distance, look exactly like the real thing. And in this world, everyone knew that nothing was higher on the food chain than a True Dragon. If someone who didn't know better was confronted with a Faldra, they would run away in terror, or otherwise just fall to the ground, praying to get out of it alive.

"Hmm. Was the Faldra not able to take the form of a giant? Then perhaps it could serve for domestic security—or perhaps the castle specifically...?" Garius murmured, deep in thought. "So many unpleasant things have been happening lately..."

"Like the Assembly of Patriots...?" I whispered.

"Correct." Petralka and her advisors smiled bitterly.

The Assembly of Patriots was a group who didn't look kindly on the otaku culture Japan was bringing in. They were, in their own way, worried about the future of their country—making them patriots of a sort, I guess—but the problem with them was that they quickly turned to violence to get what they wanted.

"The Patriots are not the only rebellious faction in this country," Petralka said. "We must carefully consider how to improve public safety so such an incident never happens again." She sighed. "But we're afraid that..."

"It's not going to be easy, huh?"

You've heard of having a viper in your midst? A Judas at your table? One of the dangers of domestic anti-government factions was that they could so easily blend in with innocent civilians. An enemy army was one thing: you just pointed your own army in the right direction and set them loose. But the enemy within your own borders—first you had to find him, figure out who was the foe and who was just another citizen.

"Magical items are especially dicey," Petralka said, leaning on the armrest of her throne. "Citizens who are less than content, but not angry

enough to openly rebel—when the army suddenly drops a huge, threatening magical weapon right in front of them, anger may quickly turn to defiance."

Ahh. In other words, people might not fight a battle they don't think they can win, but show them a weapon with enough power to make them think they *can* win, and you can end up fanning the flames.

"Fire-based magical weapons are especially... easy to understand."

"You mean like *Imarufe Bisurupeguze*, the Consuming Flame?"

This was a magical weapon the Assembly of Patriots had used to threaten the empire when they took over the school. When activated, the fire sprites inside would come rushing out all at once, causing an explosion —in basic terms, it was a big old bomb.

"No special aptitude is required to use them," Petralka said.

"Yeah, I think I remember all you need is a card and an incantation to set it off, right?"

"Correct. The user need not even be a spellcaster. One simply inserts the card and recites, 'In the name of justice, I invoke this great power!' and then—"

"Your Majesty!" Prime Minister Zahar tried to interrupt Petralka, sounding panicked. "Don't speak those words so lightly..."

"We very much doubt our voice will carry to the underground storage chamber. And even if it should, the card is not inserted, is it? Nothing's going to explode." She sounded perfectly confident.

"You keep one of those in the castle?" I asked.

"Considering this is the most well-protected place in the nation, yes. But to all things there is a limit."

"Whatever the case," Garius said, bringing us back to the subject, "there's no end of domestic difficulties. In light of Her Majesty's kidnapping by the Assembly of Patriots, there's been a flood of overeager would-be imitators."

"Yikes..."

In other words, that one incident let everyone know that Her Majesty the Empress wasn't an inviolable deity, that she was just a girl who could be kidnapped or even killed. And that thought was enough to fire up every anti-government rebel in the country.

"We've been trying to devise the best way to safeguard the Empress's person, but so far..."

“There have, however, been several suggestions,” Zahar said with a glance at Garius.

“What kind of suggestions?” I asked.

“The most convincing thus far is to make a body double for Her Majesty.”

A body double? Like the *kagemusha*, the official imposters feudal daimyos used to have?

Of course, that word brings to mind an old movie about a kagemusha who served the Sengoku-era general, Takeda Shingen, but body doubles are hardly limited to Japan’s warring states. Having a stand-in at a crucial moment happens all the time in novels and movies. I mean, there’s even that legend that it wasn’t Jesus Christ crucified on the hill of Golgotha, but his younger brother Isukiri, with the Lord himself escaping to Aomori.

“You mean she hasn’t had a royal double in the past?” Hikaru-san asked, puzzled.

Now that he mentioned it, it *was* strange. Wouldn’t an absolute monarch normally have some kind of stand-in?

“The subject has come up before, but we could never find someone who fit the part,” Garius replied.

There’s a saying that holds that somewhere in the world, there are three people who look like you—I guess the trick is finding them. I mean, Petralka was strikingly beautiful; it wouldn’t be so simple to find someone who could pass as her.

“In addition... You recall the *moo-vee* we made?”

“The movie? What about it...?”

“On account of that production, Her Majesty’s face became widely known among the populace. A double who didn’t closely resemble her would quickly be discovered.”

“Ahhh...”

So that was it. At a Middle-Ages level of technology where information didn’t spread quickly, or was badly distorted when it did, a body double or kagemusha didn’t have to look absolutely identical to the person they were replacing. Even when it came to someone important, like a king or a general, there wouldn’t be that many people who had met them in person. And even if they had seen their faces, it probably would have been just one time, at a distance.

Because of the technology we'd brought in, though—because of the movie we made—whole crowds of people had seen Petralka in glorious close-up on a gigantic screen.

Well, darn.

Had I inadvertently made finding a royal double way more difficult than it should have been?

"Come to think of it... There were those leaflets with Petralka on them in Bahairam, too. I mean, they were basically just pictures, but..."

"What...?" Garius said, furrowing his eyebrows.

Oops. Should I not have said anything?

"I see..." The knight nodded, but his face was... dark. "So it's spread all the way to Bahairam. Hrm. I suppose I should have anticipated that."

The pictures had been made in Eldant by someone who respected Petralka, but as they got more and more popular, they naturally found their way into foreign countries—including hostile ones. This whole experience was new to everyone involved, and even Garius and Zahar hadn't considered this possibility.

"And to think—recently we've even seen some scoundrels impersonating Her Majesty."

"Seriously? Like, Petralka cosplay?" I glanced at Hikaru-san.

"What?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

The word *cosplay* just made me think of him, that was all. I didn't mean anything by it. Anyway, I couldn't imagine even Hikaru-san would dress up like Petralka and then go parade around. Besides, he was too tall, and his face didn't look anything like hers.

"*Coss-play*?" Garius asked.

Ah. The people of Eldant weren't really familiar with the pastime we called cosplay. They had theaters, but outside of the context of a play, I got the impression that dressing up like someone just for fun wasn't culturally something they did. That meant our magic rings couldn't translate the idea. These very useful magic items stop helping so much when a concept comes up that isn't shared by both sides.

"It's—how do I put this? You dress up to look like someone else. That's the fun of it. Like, say you're a normal citizen, but you think knights are awesome. You want to be a little more like them, even if it's just by putting

on some armor."

"Ahh. This is indeed such... *coss-play*." Garius nodded. "For the time being, no real harm has come of it. However..." He sighed.

People were doing this out of love for Petralka, so it was hard to charge them with lèse-majesté. But at the same time, having a bunch of people running around who looked like her—right down to the hair and clothes—made things awfully complicated.

"...I guess this is my fault, huh?"

I was the one who created and released the movie, after all. I was starting to get the cold sweats, but Petralka said, "We would not go quite that far. It might have been possible to predict this outcome during the filming of the moo-vee—but not very likely. We do not seek omniscience from you, Shinichi. *But*." She leaned forward slightly. "This situation is well beyond our experience. We must hope for your help."

"My help...?"

"Do you have any clever ideas how to deal with this?" she asked, but my mind stayed blank. I was glad she thought she could turn to me, but...

"Uhhh..." I said.

"It need not be this moment," Petralka said with a bit of a smile. "But if any inspiration should strike you, inform us immediately. You have in the past frequently come up with schemes beyond our wildest imaginings."

"Is that... a compliment, Your Majesty?"

"Did it sound to you like a rebuke? You are as prone to misinterpretation as ever, Shinichi." Petralka seemed to be blushing a little.

Gosh, but this empress is cute!

I was keen to think of something—partly to justify her faith in me, but mostly because I really did want her to be safe.

"I understand. I'll give it some thought." I bowed my head.

"We're counting on you." Petralka, along with Garius and Prime Minister Zahar, nodded back.

Break time in the classroom was lively and loud. Everyone had their own way of passing the time—some students chatted, others read books,

while still others diligently started getting ready for the next lesson.

As for me, I didn't go back to the teachers' room, but just sat in a chair by the lectern, looking vacantly out at them.

"Do any of them look like Petralka...?" I scanned the classroom, picturing the loli empress in my mind. That long, silver hair and those triumphant emerald eyes. Soft cheeks and cherry-red lips. Features befitting a princess, someone who could wear a bejeweled tiara and make it look like it belonged on her.

"Turns out it's not so easy to find someone who fits all those criteria," I murmured, letting out a breath.

"Master?" came a voice from beside me. I looked up to see my maid.

The first thing that struck you about her was her flaxen hair, tied up high on each side of her head. The next thing was her big violet eyes.

She was beautiful, too, in a different way from Petralka. To use an animal metaphor, Petralka was like a feisty house cat with pedigree papers, while this girl... She was more of a frightened fawn. Her half-elf heritage meant she'd experienced a lot of discrimination in her life, and she gave an overall retiring impression, often acting like she didn't have a lot of self-confidence.

Myusel Fourant was her name. She was the very first person I had met in this other world, and also someone who took extensive care of me—up to and including saving my life on more than one occasion. Suffice to say I owed her a lot. If I told her as much, though, she would look at the ground and laugh uncomfortably and say it was just her job.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, pouring me water from a carafe.

By the way, although she normally wore a maid outfit around the house, here at school she wore a dress that she used for going out.

“Not really... I was just wondering if anyone here happened to look exactly like Petralka.”

“Her Majesty?” Myusel blinked, surprised. Her huge eyes and long eyelashes gave even that simple act the innocence of a small bird, making her look supremely cute—but anyway, never mind.

“Can you think of anyone, Myusel?”

“Not really...”

“Hmm.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of help...” She looked at the ground and her shoulders slumped.

I melted completely at the sight of Myusel looking depressed. “Oh, no, don’t worry about it! Why should you know anyone who fits that description? If it were that easy to find somebody like that, we wouldn’t be looking!”

“Anyway,” Hikaru-san piped up from nearby, sounding a bit frustrated, “most of the kids here at school are the children of nobility, influencers, important merchants, right? If any of them looked exactly like the empress, don’t you think Her Majesty or Prime Minister Zahar would have noticed already?”

Yes. Yes, I do. You are so right.

My ultimate objective with this school was to make a decent education available to everyone, regardless of social class, but we were still in the testing phases—a lot of what was happening here was experimental, and almost by definition the student population favored the noble and the rich. In other words, people who were already likely to be close to the empress. If there were any dead ringers for Petralka in that crowd, it wasn’t likely Elder Zahar or Garius would have missed them.

“Anyway, Shinichi-san?” Hikaru-san said, narrowing his eyes at me. “Supposing, just by chance, they did happen to overlook some identical twin of Her Majesty’s among the students. What would you do—recommend that student? Send your own pupil to be the empress’s body double—to get captured or killed in her place?”

“That’s another consideration,” I said with a sigh.

He was right—again. Being a body double didn’t just mean filling in when your employer had better things to do. It meant taking risks in their place—like the risk of being assassinated. Even if someone in my class fit

the bill, could I ask them to do that?

"Could you die in place of Her Majesty?"

Hmmm.

I know I'm not the world's greatest teacher or anything, but even I would balk at putting one of my students in that sort of danger. But then again, I really *did* want to come up with a way to keep Petralka safe.

Hikaru-san put a finger to his chin and said reflectively, "Instead of trying to find someone who looks exactly like her in every way, why not just find someone who's about the right height and change their appearance using magic?"

The whole thoughtful-pose thing—it really looked *right* for him. Like, if you didn't know he was a man, you could get genuinely moe for him. It was dangerous, I'll just say that. But anyway.

"That's how cosplay works," he went on. "You can use shoes to add height, and then the rest of it is makeup and wigs... If you nail the most obvious features, it's surprising how little the details actually matter."

"Wow, really?"

"There's a more basic problem, though," Hikaru-san said, looking at Myusel. "Changing someone's appearance with magic—is that possible? Could you do it while they were acting as someone's body double?"

"Well..." Myusel gave it a moment's thought, but quickly shook her head. "Magic can change the way a person looks. But getting it absolutely natural from every angle would be awfully hard."

So it would be possible to cloak someone in an illusion. But the fundamental problem of getting that illusion to look exactly right would be multiplied by having to keep it up while the person moved and spoke. And that sounded frighteningly difficult. I guess it's sort of like how a computer can display a 2D cartoon and have processing power to spare, but if you want a 3D image rendered photo-realistically in real time, then you're going to gobble up resources. Anyway, that's how I was thinking of it.

"What you're saying is, this might be a fantasy world, but that doesn't mean we can just solve any and every problem with magic, huh? I guess that makes sense."

Magic really was one of this world's outstanding technologies, but there was still a line between what could and couldn't be done with it.

"Maybe a combination of magic and makeup would fool people...? No,

that would never work.” Hikaru-san shook his head.

Covering up the imperfections in the magical disguise using conventional makeup might be possible—but where would those imperfections show up? When, and from what angles? Figuring all that out, and making someone up to cover for it, probably wasn’t practical.

“Hrmmm...”

Dead end, huh?

But I *had* to figure out something to help with Petralka’s problem, just *had* to.

Sometimes when you think you’re stuck, you just haven’t noticed that the way out is in an unexpected place... Anyway, that’s what I remembered my light-novel-author dad saying to me. He said sometimes you shelve a problem, go do something completely different, and then all of a sudden the answer comes to you.

Could I somehow “flip” what I was imagining?

That’s what was running through my head as I returned to gazing dumbly around the classroom.

And then...

Hmmm...

There, in the back of the room. An elf boy and a dwarf boy were standing on opposite sides of a desk, facing each other. In between them, on the desk, were two figures. Not the sculpture-type ones cast in a single pose; they were the jointed, action-figure type—basically fig*a, if you’ll indulge me.

They were something I’d brought in as another form of otaku culture. We kept them in the library, and students were welcome to request to take them out on loan. One of them was Kita-ikki, the heroine of the anime *Mike-mike Osuwari*. The other was Serris, leading lady of the video game *Faerie Field*.

So much, my otaku eye discerned immediately.

But then I suddenly found myself doubting that very eye: both of the figures appeared to be standing on the desk. As in, neither the elf nor the dwarf was touching them. But a second later, they moved; each of the figures grabbed firmly onto the other.

Not only that, but then Kita-ikki flung Serris—but Serris righted herself in midair, landed, a bit unsteadily, and resumed a fighting pose. Kita-ikki

attacked again. Again, the movement was somewhat odd looking, but her right leg came up high and launched a devastating roundhouse kick at Serris. She caught it on the rifle she was holding and—

Wait. Hold on. Uh-uh. No way.

What the heck was this? In front of my dumbfounded eyes, two action figures were dancing around on a desk, hitting and being hit and kicking and being kicked, straddling and being straddled. The movements were quick, but none of them ever looked quite right, either. Almost like they weren't acting of their own volition, but were being controlled, like puppets on strings...

"Magic?!" I exclaimed as I realized what was powering this bizarre sight.

It was just like with the Faldra. The dwarf's magical affinity with metal —or at least ore—and the elf's with wind magic was what was making the two characters move. The figures weren't doing it by themselves; they were being moved by an invisible hand (or hands).

"That's really incredible," I murmured. The characters' movements looked a bit halting, sure, but it was interesting to watch. They seemed to be treating the whole thing like some sort of fighting anime, with the desk as the arena and the figures as the combatants.

"Hang on..." I said as an idea began to flower in my mind.

That was it! We didn't have to go scrounging around for some identical twin.

"Master?"

"Shinichi-san?"

Myusel and Hikaru-san looked questioningly at each other, and then at me.

"I've got it!" I said. "How about this?"

And then, grinning like a fool, I explained to them the brilliant idea I'd just had.

Come the next day, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I were in the audience chamber at Eldant Castle. We'd sent a messenger the night before

requesting to meet with Petralka. “Idea re: body double,” we’d added. Myusel and Hikaru-san both reacted favorably to the idea I’d had in the classroom, as did Minori-san when I explained it to her later. That got me thinking it might actually work, and I decided to report to Petralka as soon as I could.

And so we found ourselves in the usual audience chamber, in front of the usual throne, on which the usual empress sat blinking. “*Fig-yoors*...?”

“That’s right. Figures,” I said, nodding. “Your kagemusha—your body double—I thought maybe we should make a full-scale figure that looked like you. A doll, if you will.”

“A doll?” Garius asked with a frown. “That might work well enough at a distance, if it were merely standing still, but it wouldn’t take long for people to realize it never moved.”

“Of course it would move,” I said proudly, smiling.

“What?”

“It would be an action figure, a doll with movable joints, so it could adopt any number of poses.”

Sculpture was familiar to the people of Eldant, but freely poseable dolls weren’t. They didn’t tend to think along those lines: pictures didn’t move, and neither did statues. That was considered to be common sense, which was part of why anime had been so shocking to them.

“We move the character with magic. Like a Faldra,” I said.

Now Garius and Zahar looked at each other in amazement.

“If it were full-size,” I added, “we could probably fit some little gadgets inside it, too. Make the eyes move, or the mouth, give it basic expressions. I think the dwarves would be capable of making it for us.”

“Now... that does make some sense,” Petralka murmured, thinking it over.

She and her advisors had been stuck on the idea that the body double had to be another human, so it hadn’t occurred to them to use a doll as a substitute. In our world—or actually, the world of manga and anime—this sort of thing happened pretty frequently, like in a certain such-and-such savior legend, or the epic of a certain Meiji-era swordsman. Come to think of it, it was heroines who were saved in both those cases.

Anyway, forget about that.

“Then anything else... I mean, anything that still looks too doll-ish, we

can fix with some makeup, maybe. I think Hikaru-san should be able to pull it off. Right?"

"I'd have to try it to know for sure, but probably," Hikaru-san said from beside me, nodding. "If the dwarves could build us something detailed to work from, then we could work on it to make it look as much like Your Majesty as possible. Even on people, some color in the cheeks, or under the eyes, can completely change a person's look..."

"I guess dwarven magic is mostly good for minerals," I said. "We could include some metal in the joints and other parts of the doll."

Incidentally, the fig*as in the classroom had been made of resin, with small needles stuck in the joints and limbs, and that had been enough for the dwarf boy to make it move.

"Indeed..." Petralka put her chin in her hand and thought for a long moment. Finally, sounding genuinely impressed, she said, "We knew we could count on you, Shinichi. Hardly a day has passed, and you've brought us an excellent idea already."

"Your praise honors me, Your Majesty."

I was actually a little embarrassed by it, and that made me talk a little more formally.

"This will be a more reliable method than trying to find someone who looks like you, Majesty," Garius agreed. "If we have several such dolls prepared, we could use them whenever and wherever they're needed."

Several... So he wanted to mass-produce Petralka dolls? In my head, I pictured an army of identical Petralkas marching forward, transforming into flight form, firing missiles from heavily armored parts of themselves, and so on... I privately trembled, but never mind.

"What do you think—is it possible?" I asked.

"Possible... It may be," Petralka said. "At least it should be quicker than producing Faldras."

Naturally, the gigantic Faldras might be simpler from a pure production standpoint, but then, the Petralka dolls didn't have to fly through the air or have superhuman strength or whatever.

"However," Petralka said, furrowing her brow. "Will it not be difficult to make the movements natural enough to deceive people?"

"You think so?"

"We are not terribly conversant with dwarf magic," Petralka said,

looking like she was trying to remember something. “But their puppets, the clay dolls, were originally created for purposes of manual labor—digging tunnels, carrying equipment, and so forth. Their movements are very broad and exaggerated. We have been told delicate work is much more readily dealt with by living hands.”

“Ah ha...”

For sure, the fig*as the students had been playing with had looked a bit hesitant and unnatural.

“We would not say this is impossible, but it would require finding an exceptionally skilled and precise user of clay-doll magic. This may pose a greater hurdle than the actual creation of the doll.”

“Oh, uh, on that subject.” The note of pride crept back into my voice. Kanou Shinichi, ready for anything! (Okay, maybe not *anything*.) “I know someone who might fit that bill.”

“You do?” Petralka and her advisors looked shocked. I gave them a big grin and a thumbs-up.

There was still time until dinner. After getting back to the mansion, I dropped my stuff off at my room, then headed for the living area. I didn’t really have enough time to start anything, so I went hoping I would find someone to help me pass the time.

I peeked into the living room, and saw a couple of girls in there.

Er, more precisely, I saw one girl and one guy who looked like a girl.

The guy was Hikaru-san. The girl was Elvia Harneiman, another resident of our mansion.

She had golden-brown skin, four gangly limbs, and a real *joie de vivre*. She was a pretty natural girl—okay, almost *entirely* a natural girl—but I thought that suited her best. You know how makeup would look weird on a dog or a cat? This was sort of the same thing: she was great the way nature made her.

By Eldant standards, however, Elvia was not a “human.”

She was a demi-human—a werewolf, one of the wolf-like beast people.

Although if you ask me, Elvia was less of a wolf and more like a

domestic dog—a puppy, at that. Her fuzzy ears and fluffy tail, and the way she kind of bounced everywhere she went, gave an impression of barely controlled eagerness. It made you want to just pet her and nuzzle her to your heart's content. Which would be fine with an actual dog, I guess, but Elvia was a person, a girl, so I had to fight to control myself.

Elvia was sitting in a chair, running a pencil along a piece of paper secured to an easel in front of her. Periodically, she would look up at Hikaru-san, then go back to the paper, her pencil working quickly.

Elvia called herself a wandering artist. The fact was, she was really a spy from Bahairam, but she did have some real artistic ability. She also seemed to like drawing a lot better than spying, and the rest of us didn't worry too much about her supposed "real" job.

Across from Elvia, Hikaru-san was sitting completely still. He seemed frozen—not moving a muscle, like a doll. He wasn't in any special pose; his hands were folded neatly in his lap and he was sitting naturally, but he was so still, it was almost like he wasn't breathing. I had never seen anyone stay so motionless.

Elvia seemed to be using her—er, him—as a model for a drawing.

Hikaru-san was expressionless. Elvia was the picture of seriousness. There was an electricity in the air, and I discovered I couldn't quite bring myself to step into the room.

But then Hikaru-san noticed me standing there. “Heavens,” he said. “Is something the matter?” Only his eyes and mouth moved.

“Oh, no, I don’t need anything special... Just wondering if I can come in...”

“You’re fine.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks...”

I came in hesitantly and sat in a chair next to Hikaru-san. Elvia’s eyes stayed fixed on her canvas; she didn’t so much as glance at me. She just kept drawing away in absolute concentration. I knew how focused she could be, but it never failed to impress me. When she was deep in a drawing, sometimes Elvia wouldn’t even hear you if you talked to her.

Just incidentally, the pencil she was using was one I’d gotten for her from Japan. She always used to work in charcoal, but once I became interested in her artistic abilities, I started to wonder what she would do with more specialized supplies—and it turned out she learned them very quickly, and her drawing abilities immediately improved. She wasn’t exactly using a pen tablet or CG rendering programs yet, but hey.

“I think we’ll be done soon,” Hikaru-san said, smiling.

“Right...” I could only give a noncommittal nod.

Soon the only sounds in the living room were our respective breathing, and Elvia’s pencil scratching along the paper.

“All done!” Elvia announced suddenly, looking up. She had a gigantic grin on her face, genuinely thrilled, the kind of smile that makes you happy just to see it. She really did love art. Moments like these were when Elvia looked the most adorable of all.

But, uh, anyway...

“Shinichi-sama?!”

Her eyes went wide—she had finally noticed me. I told you she knew how to concentrate. Someone could have a sword at her throat, or a fight could break out, or a natural disaster could bring the house tumbling down around her, and she might not even notice. There was a certain danger in that, but I had to admit, I was a little jealous, too.

“Wh-When did you get here?!”

“Just a few minutes ago.” I smiled. “So you were drawing Hikaru-san?”

“Uh-huh. I like to do faces from time to time, y’know?”

“And I happened to be passing through,” Hikaru-san added, “so she

called me over."

We had established that doing art was Elvia's way of attenuating her beast-person hunting instinct. It involved careful focus, feeling out the object of your attention, and taking it within you—all things shared with stalking prey. That would explain why she wanted to draw still lifes and people as much as sketching from her imagination.

"Thanks a lot, Hikaru-sama."

"Can I see the picture?" Hikaru-san held out his hands.

"Sure!" Smiling, she handed him the finished product.

I took a peek, too.

"Ooh," I breathed in admiration.

On the paper was a black-and-white Hikaru-san. This was more than a sketch—it almost looked like a photograph. Elvia had always had a gift for realism, and once she got hold of pencils, with their capacity for precision, I felt like the details of her pictures had only improved.

"This is incredible, Elvia," I said.

"Y-Y' think so? Heh heh..." She blushed. She scratched the end of her nose, maybe a gesture of embarrassment. In any event, she looked awfully cute doing it.

"You've got him to a T," I said, looking closely at the "Hikaru-san" on the paper.

"I guess it has that in common with making figures," Hikaru-san said quietly, looking at the picture with me.

"Huh?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you emphasize things, make them more than they are. If the subject's eyes droop a little, you draw them drooping a little more. If they're a bit rotund, you make them a little rounder. A touch of exaggeration actually makes the impression more accurate." Hikaru-san pointed to the picture. "The drawing *seems* photo-real, but you can see that the details are just a little bit off—a little bit overemphasized. I don't know if Elvia's doing that consciously or not, but..."

Hikaru-san pulled out his phone and pulled up a picture. It was him—wearing different clothes, but looking substantially like Elvia's drawing. (That's a cosplayer; of course he would have pictures of himself on his phone.)

"I get it..."

I had understood intellectually the technique of emphasizing certain details, but as someone who didn't do any drawing, I didn't really have a good personal grasp of it. But with the photo and the drawing side-by-side, I could pick up the differences.

Things like the angle and the light can make a person look like a total stranger in a photograph, and there was no question that between the two of them, Elvia's drawing *felt* closer to Hikaru-san as I pictured him in my head.

"Again, I don't think Elvia is doing it deliberately."

I guess that's talent for you.

"Doin' what?" she asked, looking a little perplexed.

"That's what makes me think that when it comes to the puppet double for Her Majesty, there are some things about the clothes and appearance that we should change," Hikaru-san said, putting a finger to his chin. "We could just put it in normal clothes, to make it look like her, but because we also want to hide the joints and stuff, I thought maybe custom-made clothing might be in order... Then again, it depends a little on how it's made. We should probably hide ball joints, but otherwise, it might actually look unnatural trying to cover them up."

"Clothes aren't exactly my specialty," I said, "so maybe I can leave that to you?"

"Fine by me. I'm sure Minori-san will have some ideas, too."

They both loved cosplay, anyway. I figured it would be a lot more efficient to just let them handle everything, rather than trying to offer my amateur opinions.

"That just leaves the makeup... or I guess you'd say the paint," Hikaru-san said. "Mostly we can let the dwarves handle that. Her Majesty looks pretty young, so the main thing will be to emphasize that. Maybe make the stand-in look a little rounder, be sure to get some blush in the cheeks..."

"I agree with everything you just said," I told him, "but take my advice and never let Petralka hear you say it."

Petralka was somewhat less than happy about her girlish appearance. If anyone described her as young or childish, regardless of whether they meant anything by it, she would get steaming mad. I happened to have received a royal punch to the face at our first meeting—although that was partly my fault for exclaiming "IS THAT ***REALLY*** AN ARCHETYPICAL

LITTLE GIRL CHARACTER?!” the moment I saw her.

“Anyway, there are some things we’ll need to ask Minori-san and Matoba-san about,” I said. I was hoping we could get the doll’s external covering—its skin—from Japan, along with the clothing materials and makeup. After all, putting clothes and paint right onto a wooden (or metal) surface didn’t seem likely to fool anybody.

But that would mean working with Matoba Jinzaburou-san—the middleman between my company, Amutech, and the Japanese government; a classic bureaucrat. And that thought made my skin crawl.

“So you can’t just make them look identical,” Elvia mused, looking at her drawing and the photo of Hikaru-san. “Who knew this was so hard?”

“Yeah, sometimes overemphasizing things makes them look more realistic.”

“Izzat right...”

“I think we talked about this before.”

“We did?” She chuckled with embarrassment. Geez, she was one adorable beast girl.

“You mean you don’t think about that stuff when you’re drawing?” Hikaru-san asked.

Elvia shook her head. “Uh-uh. Not a bit.”

I knew it: she wasn’t going by logic but by a sort of intuition, a *je ne sais quoi*. I had to marvel afresh; that itself indicated serious talent.

“Oh, here you are,” said a voice as clear and sweet as the ringing of a bell. We turned, and there was Myusel, once more dressed in her maid outfit, in the doorway. “Dinner is ready, but I couldn’t find any of you in your rooms...”

“Thanks. We’ll be right there.” I got up from my chair, and Hikaru-san and Elvia did the same.

I had a lot to think about, but priority one was getting some food in me. Who could think on an empty stomach?

And so I followed Myusel into the kitchen.

Okay, so anyway, the next day came.

And I stood wondering how I had gotten myself into this.

I stood smack in the middle of a large room, desperately concerned about my current situation.

In front of me was a girl with her back to me. She was wearing very light clothes—probably the best way I could describe what she was wearing was as a camisole and shorts; anyway, obviously very thin clothing that left the lines of her body easily visible. Her bare shoulders and pale legs just about blinded me. It was enough to make me worry that a careless touch might despoil her.

It was the honored and alluring body of Petralka an Eldant III.

But...

Is that... the spell she was talking about before?

There on her back—her lower back, just above her behind—a complicated pattern was tattooed into her skin. The ink was almost the color of her flesh, so it didn't stand out much, but I bet you could see it better, say, after she had been in the bath, when the skin was flushed.

A member of the imperial family was always in danger from assassins and killers. While her royal knights might be able to deflect swords or arrows, powerful and/or long-range magic wasn't something you could stop with a shield or armor. Hence, her body was covered in spells designed to reflect offensive magic.

I had seen it work once, but I had never seen the inscription itself with my own eyes.

Man... It brings home to you just how important an empress is...

I know it was a little late to be having that epiphany. Sorry.

"Won't you hurry and do it, Shinichi?" Petralka urged me.

"Oh, but, uh..."

"Yes, what?" She glared back at me over her shoulder. "What makes you hesitate?"

"No matter how careful I am, I'm still... gonna touch you."

"We believe we instructed you not to worry about such niceties. Or what? Do you find the notion of touching our person unpleasant?"

"N-No, not at all."

I had exactly the opposite problem, actually. I was afraid that one stray touch would lead to another, and pretty soon I wouldn't be able to stop myself from huffing and panting and getting my hands all over her. All of

which, I was fairly confident, would lead to the prompt separation of my head from my body.

"Not at all?" Petralka pursed her lips in displeasure, turning even more towards me.

Urgh. That's a very dangerous angle, Your Majesty.

I found my brain overwhelmed by the almost-but-not-quite perspective, the small space between the camisole(-ish thing) and her skin through which I could very nearly, maybe-but-maybe-not catch a glimpse of that small chest. It might have been a modest endowment, but it was a girl's chest just the same. As slight as it was, it pushed up the camisole, hence why there was the tiniest gap between her skin and the fabric, and to see it was like looking into a secret place where I mustn't look but which was now revealed before meeeeeeeghhhhhh.

Without really thinking about it, I found myself clapping a hand over my nose and looking away.

I forced myself to take my eyes off Petralka—and instead looked at Minori-san, who was standing with an exasperated expression on her face. "Shinichi-kun, I get it, okay? But Her Highness was kind enough to take time out of her busy schedule for us, so..."

"...Yeth, ma'am. I underthand."

I nodded, then gently took my hand off my nose.

Safe. No nosebleed. So far.

Then I took a deep breath.

That's right. Calm down, Kanou Shinichi.

I wasn't alone in here. Minori-san was with me, and so was Hikaru-san, while several female knights—Petralka's royal guard—stood along the walls. Maybe the reason I felt so jumpy had to do with the collective suspicion they were leveling at me.

Right. It's okay.

Even on the off chance I totally lost it and committed a crime for the ages, or looked like I was about to commit a crime, someone would stop me. I hoped.

All too aware that I was maybe relying too much on the kindness of those around me, I reached out for Petralka again.

"Okay," I said, taking her delicate arm in my hand. "P-Pardon me..."

I could hear my own heart pounding in my chest. This was hardly the

first time I had touched Petralka—she even used to sit on my lap while we read books together, and I'd been unable to avoid touching her exposed shoulders then. But even so, confronted with the empress in what amounted to her underwear, I couldn't help the feeling I was doing something absolutely taboo.

Carefully, oh so carefully, I pressed it to Petralka's body.

"It" being the measuring tape I'd borrowed from Hikaru-san.

"Let's see..." I ran the measuring tape around her, reading off the number for her waist.

Minori-san's job was to take notes, though apparently we were also audio-recording this. Hikaru-san was just an observer; he stood slightly apart, watching me.

So, what were we doing? In a word, we were taking Petralka's measurements. In a few more words, we needed detailed numbers for different parts of her body. This was all so that we could build her body double—her stand-in doll.

Making a detailed replica naturally required taking detailed measurements. Personally, I felt that job could have been handled by anybody, but someone had the bright thought that as the guy who had come up with the idea, I should handle the measurements as well.

I guess as sort of the foreman, it made a certain kind of sense—but I made sure to have Minori-san and Hikaru-san with me, the people who would handle making the actual clothes. They knew a lot more about this sort of thing than I did.

But then came the moment when we were actually ushered into the audience chamber. Petralka had turned to her guards for help removing her clothing, and then standing there in her undergarments had turned back to me and said, "Now, measure. You need not hesitate."

"Uh, Petralka..."

"What is it?"

"I don't mean to quibble, but... are you sure it wouldn't be better for Minori-san or one of your guards to do this...?"

I know, I know. Taking some measurements shouldn't really be guilt-inducing stuff. But even so, I was a guy and Petralka was a girl, and with virtually nothing but a thin piece of cloth between me and her, I couldn't help feeling embarrassed.

Come to think of it, back when we were making the movie, I'd accidentally stumbled into the girls' changing area, but Petralka hadn't seemed very bothered then, either. She'd had her guards help her out of her clothes earlier—I guess important people rarely change clothes all by themselves, so maybe she'd numbed any sense of embarrassment.

Me, though, I couldn't take this so calmly. Not to mention, I wasn't just measuring her height or something. We needed the length of her arms, her legs, the size of her hips and chest, and more. I thought girls usually didn't want guys knowing that sort of thing about them—especially their bust size.

Or did Petralka just not think of me as a guy? That would have been something of a tragedy in its own right, but...

"And yet a quibbler you are," Petralka said, glancing over her shoulder again. "Are you indeed so averse to touching our person?"

"I told you, that's not the problem."

"Then carry on." She fixed her gaze forward again. Somehow she looked almost... amused. Maybe she enjoyed watching me squirm?

"Ah, yes. Shinichi."

"Yes...?" I responded. Meanwhile I resumed taking her measurements, trying to pretend I was a machine with no feelings.

"When the time comes that the spellcaster is found who will operate the double, I leave their education in your hands as well. Is that acceptable?"

"Their education?"

"We assume some practice will be necessary to make the doll move and act like us. We are instructing you to provide the spellcaster that guidance."

"Me...?" I shot a glance at Minori-san and Hikaru-san. They looked almost as surprised as I felt.

"Your Majesty," Hikaru-san said, "please forgive my presumption, but wouldn't it be better to entrust that task to someone personally closer to you?"

I agreed one hundred percent. Garius and Zahar, for example, had both known her way longer than I had; they must have had a better sense of Petralka's smallest tics.

But Petralka shook her head. "No..." The long silver hair fluttered in front of me.

Wow. Her hair brushed my nose, and it tickled, but it also smelled good. My Kurobe Dam was already about to burst.

“We found your direction during the production of the moo-vee to be quite appropriate. One who is too close may be prone to missing certain details—so Garius tells us. In any event, we are not out to deceive friends and family. As far as catching the ‘gist’ of us—Shinichi. We believe you understand it well.”

“The movie?” Hikaru-san said, putting a finger to his chin and looking puzzled. “I know what you mean. That’s one of the projects you did before I got here, right? Didn’t it feature Her Majesty as a magical girl who—”

“Silence!” Petralka exclaimed suddenly. “We shall not permit further discussion of that *thing*!”

“Oh... Of course.” Hikaru-san nodded, cowed by the sudden outburst. Petralka, for her part, was red up to her ears.

“Petralka... Calm down,” I said with a grin. Apparently that movie was still a raw nerve for her. Personally, I thought that was too bad—she’d been adorable in it. Even her somewhat awkward performance was sweet in its own way.

“.....Anyway,” Petralka said with a single, pointed cough, bringing us back to the original subject. “We wish to entrust the matter to you.”

“Well, if you insist...” I could hardly refuse.

“We request that you focus on things here. You may reduce your workload at school or delegate that business to others for a while. A room will be prepared here for you.”

“Is it really that urgent?” I asked in surprise.

“Not precisely,” Petralka replied, “but still...” She spared another glance back at me. “Shinichi, it has been some time since you visited the castle for any reason other than to make your regular reports, has it not?”

“Er... I guess so. I didn’t think a castle was the sort of place you just dropped by to hang out, you know?”

Being a *castle* and all.

It was Petralka’s home, but it was also the seat of the government of the Holy Eldant Empire, like the Japanese Prime Minister’s residence and all the cabinet offices all rolled into one. I didn’t think you just popped in for a visit the way you might at a friend’s house.

Petralka, though, looked forward again, almost seeming to pout as she said, “Come even when you have no specific business.”

“That would be totally out of line...”

“We are unable to go to you, therefore you must come to us, must you not?”

“.....Ah.”

You might recall that the terrorist incident with the Assembly of Patriots was one of the background causes for this whole discussion of a body double. Petralka had been an actual hostage—the Patriots could have killed her anytime they wanted. The whole thing came as a shock to the empress’s advisors, and for reasons of safety, Petralka’s excursions had been severely limited since then.

“Come here sometimes. Even if you do not have... ahem... any specific business.” Petralka seemed almost hesitant; after a moment’s silence she added, “It—It gets lonely, does it not?”

“Petralka...”

I looked at her, she looked at the ground, and I felt an almost painful squeezing in my heart. How could an absolute monarch be *so dang cute*?! I was gonna die! Die of moe! Or if not from moe, then because I just couldn’t hold myself back from giving her a big hug and getting my head chopped off! Danger! Stay calm, my arms!

I fought valiantly to push back the rising tide of chuunibyou-ishness within me.

But, uh, anyway, she was right. I had school. Petralka had an empire to run. That didn’t leave us with a lot of opportunities to see each other, and because of our respective positions, we rarely got the chance to just talk as friends.

Could it be... Had she asked me to handle these measurements for the same reason?

Wait... Was she... Could she be inventing excuses to see me?

.....

Ahhhhhhhhh!! The bittersweetness! Why is this bittersweetness filling my—nay, overflowing from my heart?! What’s going on here?!

This feeling—is this *feeling moe?!*

Okay, so I was maybe putting all these pieces together a little late.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Petralka’s back. “I get it. I’ll be sure to stop by sometimes, even if I don’t need anything.”

“Th-That will be well.”

I couldn’t see her face, but I could see her beet-red ears, and it made me break out in a smile.

Chapter Two: A Puppet Master?

When I arrived at school that day, I didn't immediately start preparing for lessons. There was someone I wanted to find first.

Students were chatting with each other in the classroom during the few free moments before lessons started. I sought out the person in the crowd that I was looking for and called out to her.

"Hey, Romilda. Sorry, could I have a moment?"

"Yes?" The diminutive girl looked over when I called her name. Well, I say diminutive, but that's only by my standards. Compared to other dwarves, she was about average. But anyway. "What is it?" She left off talking with her friends and came over to me.

"Just come over here for a second," I said, leading her out into the hallway. Then I looked around. I made sure there was no one else in the vicinity, then lowered my voice and said, "We're going to be making a doll version of Petralka—of Her Majesty."

I told her about wanting to make a doll that could fill in for the empress. About how we hoped the dwarves could help us with it. Sparing the details, I told Romilda as quickly as I could about the Make Petralka a Kagemusha Plan.

Learning all of this left Romilda wide-eyed and silent. We didn't have much time, though, so I forged ahead. "I assume Prime Minister Zahar or Minister Garius will contact your father to discuss this officially. But the point is—" here I got to what I was really wanting to ask—"we need a dwarf who's good at controlling dolls, but can also keep a secret. Can you think of anyone like that? A girl would be best. Do any of the other students fit that description?"

"Uh... Um..." Romilda cocked her head. Apparently no one came to mind immediately.

I pressed the point. "What about—you know how lately there have been kids playing with action figures in the classroom, making them move?"

"Uh-huh."

“Like that. But—hmm, it’s got to be like, if the figures do the dance from the *Prepure* ending, people would have to be like, ‘Wow, did these guys just jump off the screen?’ The kid has to be that good.”

“I’ve got to admit, that’s...” Romilda frowned.

No dice, huh? Well, I had kind of expected as much. I’d seen the kids playing with the figures, but the movements always looked a little strange, a far cry from seeming practically alive. Handling Petralka’s double would mean even more things to think about, too—facial expressions and small finger movements. If they couldn’t make an action figure move smoothly, they weren’t going to be able to handle that.

I’d told Petralka and the others that I had an idea, and I did, but first I’d wanted to ask Romilda, since she would know who was who among the dwarves better than I would.

“So on that note, I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You remember when I came to the underground workshop the other day? And there was that super skilled clay-doll user. The girl using three of them at once?”

“Oh, Lauron, sure!” Romilda clapped her hands and nodded.

“Yeah, exactly. Can she keep a secret?”

“I’m pretty sure...” Romilda looked thoughtful. “It’s like... She’s stubborn. Or maybe *diligent* would be a better word? If you tell her not to talk, I think she’d keep her mouth shut to the grave.”

“G-Gee, really?”

“Anyway, she’s plenty serious... No, that’s not quite the word. Inflexible, maybe.”

“Hmm...”

A bit obstinate, I guessed. She hadn’t really looked it, but...

“Anyway, I definitely think Lauron fits your criteria, Sensei. I’ve never seen her work anything but the clay dolls in the workshop, but...”

“But if she can handle three at once, it means that if she focused entirely on a single doll, she’d probably be something else, right?”

“Yeah, I sure think so.” Romilda nodded. “She might really be able to re-create the *Prepure* dance!”

Romilda looked genuinely happy. Maybe she was pleased to think one of her acquaintances would be entrusted with the immensely important task

of helping to keep the empress safe. If this worked, it might do even more for the dwarves than mass-producing Faldras.

In any event, it looked like I'd been on the right track.

"Do you think you could bring her by my mansion?"

"You want me to bring Lauron to your house?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sensei, don't tell me..." She seemed to have an inkling of an idea.

"Huh? Tell you what?"

"Are you trying to grow your harem?"

"As if!" I exclaimed. "That's practically slander!"

A few students peeked out from the classroom to see what was going on. I instinctively shifted a little and whispered into Romilda's ear, so no one else would hear what we were talking about.

"What about this conversation made you think *that* was where this was going?"

"Men are all *about* harems, right? They're at the center of so many plots."

I mean, yes, men like harems! Wait—who had she heard that from?!

"Any man who deliberately did that for real would just be a disgusting crook!"

"But you have Minori-sensei and Myusel-sensei and Elvia-san living right there with you..."

"Yes! Yes, we are all living in the same house, that's true!"

Minori-san was my bodyguard, Myusel was my maid, and as for Elvia, she was Amutech's in-house artist—not one of them was in any way romantically involved with me. In fact, unless one of them actually asked me to do something with her, I would never imagine thinking of my pure, sweet housemates in those terms. It would make me feel terrible. In fact, I couldn't believe she'd said it.

"And if you can go for someone like Elvia-san, then a dwarf would obviously—"

"Okay, I'm not saying I can't get moe for elves or dwarves or whatever, but that's a totally different subject!"

By the way, traditional fantasy works usually depict even female dwarves as having beards and looking like elderly guys, but at least in this world, that's not how it was. Much like the elves—maybe because they

both shared a close affinity with the sprites—the prime of their lives (that is to say, their youth) seemed to last a long time.

"Huh? So you wanted something else?"

"Of course I did!"

What did she take me for?! Was this how I looked to my students?

Just as I was trying to produce an expression that would make clear exactly how much I regretted this misunderstanding, the bell rang. It was time for class.

We had to go back in the classroom—for that matter, my standing out here alone with Romilda could fuel exactly the sort of talk I was upset about.

"Uh, anyway, take care of things for me, will you? And just to be extra clear, this is absolutely secret, okay?"

"Yes, sir!" Romilda nodded firmly, and then the two of us returned to the classroom.

A few days later, we really got down to the business of producing Petralka's double.

The place: my mansion. True, the dwarf workshop would have had more tools, better facilities, and been overall more convenient, but it was too big; too many people came and went there to guarantee secrecy. Anyway, since I was the general director of the project, doing things at my house made a certain kind of practical sense.

Then again, it also happened to be home to Elvia, who was nominally a Bahairamanian spy. But as far as she went... eh, I figured it would be fine. Call it a product of the trust we'd built up for each other, or chalk it up to the fact that she never seemed very diligent in reporting anything back home. (She sort of seemed to leave something to be desired as an agent of espionage.) Even if some sudden fit of loyalty to the motherland welled up in her, I figured we would notice the change in her behavior. Honestly, it would've been way harder to manage information security without knowing who the spy was.

And so, with all that settled...

“Man, this is amazing, though,” I said, putting my hands on my hips and checking out the new addition. Namely, the workshop now standing out behind the house. “Or, I guess I should say *you’re* amazing, Brooke.”

“How’s that, sir?” my main builder asked from beside me.

Brooke Darwin was the lizardman groundskeeper at our mansion. Just like the name suggests, lizardmen looks like big, bipedal lizards. Plus, Brooke was a lot taller than me—including the length of his tail, probably something like three meters. To be blunt, not the sort of person you’d want to run into in a dark alley.

But notwithstanding how he looked, Brooke was loyal and honest—not to mention a passionately celebrated hero of his people. He had a fair amount of pull with the lizardmen; in this case, for example, he’d brought several of his tribesmen, and in less than three days they’d constructed an entire small workshop.

I do mean small, really just enough to keep out the elements—but still, considering that they weren’t professionals and didn’t have special building materials, it was still pretty shocking. They had even made a set of big double doors so that we could bring in materials as necessary.

“I mean, you put up an *entire* building in less than three days.”

“Well, I was in th’ army,” Brooke said. “Digging and building are a soldier’s bread and butter.”

“Oh... That makes sense.”

Being able to set up a base quickly and reliably right on the front would certainly be useful in the military.

As I was thinking about this, Minori-san called from the mansion. “The dwarves’ll be here soon!”

I could see Hikaru-san standing beside her.

“Right,” I called, “I’ll be right there. Brooke, good work—thanks again.” Then I went over to Minori-san and we all headed for the front door.

“Huh, hope it works out okay,” I said.

“You almost sound like it’s someone else’s business,” Hikaru-san said, shooting me a pointed, sidelong glance. “You masterminded this entire thing, right?”

“Well, yeah, sure. But I won’t be doing the actual *work* work...”

“We’ll just have to trust the dwarves for that, won’t we?” Minori-san said.

“I trust them,” Hikaru-san said. “But whenever you do something for the first time—not just this doll thing—nothing ever goes quite according to plan. There are always screw-ups and problems you could never have predicted.”

“That’s when we’ll have to call on the talents of our project manager,” Minori-san said, smiling pleasantly.

I frowned. “Lay off the pressure, please...” Then I thought about it for a moment. “You know, though, speaking of what *always happens*, think about how if we were in a manga or a drama, once the body double was built the dwarves would all be poisoned or something to preserve secrecy. I’d be all, *Your work here is done! Mwahaha!*”

“Good luck getting the thing maintenanced if you kill all the mechanics,” Hikaru-san shrugged.

Before I knew it, we were all back in the front hall.

“Master.”

I looked up at the voice and saw Myusel walking toward us. Behind her came a line of dwarves.

“The guests from the Guld Workshop have arrived.”

“Thanks for showing them in, Myusel.”

“Yes, sir.” Myusel gave a bow and stood off to the side.

As for me, I turned to the newly arrived dwarf builders. At a glance, most of them appeared to be adult dwarf men. I guessed the importance of the job had led to the most experienced workers being sent to me.

Dwarves are never very tall, but the men in particular look rugged, bulging with muscles that made me feel like I had to be careful when I shook their hands, lest they crush my poor, weak fingers. A whole crowd of these dwarves was even more intimidating than one by himself. Several of them were frowning—not from annoyance, I suspected, but from an understandable nervousness.

Then I heard a familiar voice from behind the line of dwarves. “Sensei!”

Romilda shoved her way out from the pack of old men.

“Huh? Romilda, you’re here, too?”

I had left it to the boss of Guld Workshop (read: Romilda’s dad) to pick the workers. Was she actually a long-standing, experienced craftsman herself?

“My father asked me to observe.”

“Oh. Sure, okay.”

“And I brought someone else, too.” Romilda tugged on someone’s hand, pulling them out in front of the crowd. “Here’s Lauron, just like you asked.”

A dwarf girl stood there, with short gray hair under a black cap. Romilda gave her a little push, and she stepped forward, bowing her head in our direction.

“Lauron Selioz, at your service.”

Lauron was about a head shorter than me. Her baby face and big eyes gave her a youthful appearance—I would have believed you if you’d said she was in primary school. But as I recalled, she was actually Romilda’s age. So... in her teens?

“I’ve heard about the situation,” she said. “I appreciate your asking for me. I look forward to working with you.”

“Oh, uh, me too, definitely.”

She bowed her head again, and I found myself bowing back.

Lauron came across as really... serious. There was something formalistic about the way she talked, almost like she’d learned the right phrases to use and was reciting them from memory. Well, maybe she was just anxious, like the others.

“I’d like to speak to you privately,” I said. I had to give her the details of her other assignment: not just building the Petralka doll, but learning to make it act like the empress.

“Shinichi-kun?” Minori-san asked dubiously. “This girl is—”

Oh, I’d forgotten. All of our discussions had been about the actual production; I hadn’t mentioned picking someone to control the puppet to Minori-san.

“She—”

I started to explain, but Romilda jumped in. “Sensei was set on Lauron at first sight!”

“Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said in a tone of exasperation. “I know you talk about how every man dreams of having his own harem, but this—”

“That’s not what this is about!” I exclaimed. “Romilda, I thought I told you not to say things that could get me in trouble like that!”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.” All the same, she shrugged and stuck out her tongue. With that, I was certain: she had done this on purpose. On purpose!

Romilda, do you really want to make me out to be some kind of

perverted manimal, heaving with lust?! I may have a whole parade of two-dimensional bride-sans, but I'll have you know that on their three-dimensional counterparts I've never laid a hand!

"I mean, when you start out by asking to talk *privately*..." Minori-san looked at me, less reproachfully than expectantly.

Wait... was it Minori-san spreading the "Kanou harem" theory?!

"In any case," I said, coughing and shooting a look around, "Lauron isn't here for production. I picked her to handle the next phase. I just want to talk to her about the details. Hikaru-san, Minori-san, come with me, please. Myusel, please show everyone else to the outbuilding. Brooke is around back."

"Certainly."

Myusel nodded, and I left Romilda and the other dwarves with her, while Lauron and I headed for the living area.

I asked Lauron to have a seat, then took a place on the other side of the table.

"All right." I asked Hikaru-san to serve tea in place of Myusel, who was showing the dwarves around, and turned back to Lauron. "I'm sorry to make you come all the way over here."

"It's all right," Lauron said. She sat up straight, hands on her knees. It was a very "proper" posture—it made her serious character perfectly clear.

"Uh, maybe I should start by introducing myself for real. I'm Kanou Shinichi."

"Yes, I've heard from the young lady." Lauron looked straight at me. She must have been talking about Romilda. They were the same age, but Lauron wasn't a student; she was a laborer in the workshop. Romilda was, for her, the daughter of her employer. "She described you as an evangelist for otaku culture. Teacher at the school. From a country called Ja-pan."

"Er, oh." Well, that saved me time introducing myself.

Then Lauron, still looking straight at me and perfectly serious, continued, "And also a *total bottom*."

"Uh... Pause there, will you?"

“A man whose main hobby is surrounding himself with women to serve him.”

“Waitwaitwaitwait!” I interrupted her, more desperately than I meant to.

What had Romilda been telling people?! I was starting to think there were some pretty ugly rumors about me going around!

“That’s not true! None of that is even remotely true!”

“He’s right, it isn’t,” Minori-san said from beside me. “He’s a slutty bottom.”

“Pipe down, you rotten WAC!” I was practically in tears.

“So it’s... not true...?” Lauron was looking at us, puzzled. There was a note of confusion in her voice.

Was it really that surprising? Anyway, she seemed a little strange herself...

“Absolutely not.”

“I... I see...” She nodded, still not looking entirely sure. She sounded so different from before, in fact, that it was almost like she was another person.

Then again, the first time I’d seen her—the time that dwarf was getting angry at her—she’d reacted more or less like this. Maybe this was baseline for her.

But anyway...

“I don’t fully understand the expression ‘total bottom’... Is a ‘slutty bottom’ the same sort of thing?”

“Let’s save the lessons for something more productive,” I said, forcing the conversation back on track. “Ahem. So Romilda has pretty much told you what this is about?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. On that note...” I took an action figure I’d put in here earlier and flipped it faceup. It was a girl with golden hair, wearing a short pink leotard and skirt. Pureheart, from *Prepure*.

Lauron looked at the figure with a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Since she didn’t go to the school, she had probably never seen one of these, even if maybe she’d heard of them.

“Here you are.” Hikaru-san put tea down in front of each of us.

“Thanks, Hikaru-san,” I said.

“Thank you very much,” Lauron said, looking up at Hikaru-san.

She reached out. I thought she was going to take a drink immediately,

but instead, she gave the cup a small push with her finger. Maybe the angle had bothered her somehow? It seemed a bit obsessive.

What was that about...?

"Umm. May I go on?"

"Certainly." She nodded.

"I want you to move this," I said, pointing to the figure. "Realistically. I want you to make it look like Her Majesty the Empress, if you can."

At the workshop, I had seen for myself how talented Lauron was when it came to controlling puppets. And what I'd witnessed in the classroom had shown me that the same magic that controlled clay dolls could manipulate action figures. So if we took a genius like Lauron and gave her a life-size doll to work with, would she be able to make it look human?

That was the real question. Of course, if we just wanted the doll to stand at attention during ceremonial occasions, or wave to the people from a balcony someplace, it might not have required that much magical skill. Someone other than Lauron might have been able to operate the body double. That's why we had started working on it before we actually confirmed whether Lauron would be able to do what we wanted.

But if possible, I was interested in using the doll as more than just a display piece. If it could trick someone when they were close enough to reach out and touch it, make them think it was the real person, then the situations in which we could use the stand-in would increase exponentially. The absolutely ideal outcome? Maybe the doll could even help reduce Petralka's workload a little bit. That was my thought.

"Can you do it?"

The figure, by the way, had been manufactured with plastic joints, but we had stuck a bit of metal into each of the points of articulation. That would make it easier for the dwarven magic to work on it.

"Making it move won't be a problem," Lauron told me. She didn't qualify that: no *maybe*, *probably*, or *I think*. A simple declaration. She was back to the seriousness she had displayed at first.

"I can control three clay dolls at once, so I should be able to control one doll with three times as many joints. Though it may take me some time to figure out exactly what's possible."

"Wow..."

My understanding was that one of those dolls had at least a hundred

points of articulation—maybe even two or three times that, depending how you counted. Of course, you weren't focusing on each and every one of them at once when controlling a clay doll, but still.

"However..." Lauron frowned at the action figure. "What does moving it mean, specifically...?"

She sounded less sure of herself again.

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"There are all kinds of movements. Walking, sitting, eating... And the definition of realistic—that could be any number of things. As far as making it look like Her Majesty, that's a rather... open-ended order as well..."

"Ah..." Even I could understand what Lauron was getting at. I had been thinking that because the clay dolls were roughly humanoid in shape, making the movements look more "human" would just be a matter of refining them.

Petralka had said herself that the clay dolls were used much like forklifts or earth movers, or like the robotic arms you see on an assembly line—they were designed for labor purposes. It didn't really matter what they looked like. Yes, they were based on people, but they had never been intended to replicate them. The dwarves had never given any thought to how to make the movements "more realistic" because that had never been the point.

"Hmmm..."

What to do? I could try to model some movements, but just having someone dance around in front of her didn't seem likely to help much. I needed some example of something that wasn't human, but seemed like it was.

That was when it hit me. "Oh. I've got it. I'm sure I have it downloaded here somewhere..."

I pulled my smartphone out of my pocket and started going through my folders of video files.

There. I selected one file in particular.

"Something like this. See?"

A jaunty melody played through the phone's speaker.

"What's this...?" Lauron looked at the screen, eyes wide.

It was the ending song from *Prepure*.

Prepure was a typical anime, done the old-fashioned way: by stringing

2D images together so they looked like they were moving. The ending, though, that was different. It showed 3D renderings of the characters from the show, dancing and singing in virtual space.

In other words, acting like dolls moving on their own.

I'd heard that the characters in this ending clip did more than just flounce around. There were a lot of little gimmicks worked in that the uninitiated would never notice.

Human motion is nothing like mechanical, motor-driven movement. Bundles of muscles expand and contract, creating movement. So for example, the animators did a lot of research into how to make an arm go up and down, trying to figure out how to make the doll's joints move in the way that most closely resembled a human doing the same thing.

Hence why characters who didn't really exist appeared almost as if they were flesh and blood. Add in shadows and hair movement, and they started to look really real.

Lauron watched the *Prepure* ED with rapt attention. Finally the song ended, the video freezing on the characters with their hands in the air and big smiles on their faces, but Lauron continued to stare at the smartphone for a moment more.

Then she said, "You want it to move like that, is that right?" She didn't even look away from the screen as she spoke.

"Yeah, more or less."

"May I see it again?"

"Sure."

I started the song again and handed my phone to Lauron. She stared fixedly at the screen, her violet eyes wide. She seemed to be drinking it in; when the song ended, I reached out and started it again.

Lauron watched it five times through.

Then she nodded and handed the phone back to me.

"Understood," she said.

"Understood? What do you understand?"

"I can move it," she declared. She sounded absolutely certain.

"Oh, uh—really? Give it a try, then."

"All right."

Lauron raised her hands over the action figure. At the same time, I saw her lips moving slightly—I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I was

sure it must be the words of a spell.

And then I practically jumped as the action figure started moving.

First it bounced to its feet and stood stock-still. Then it did a half-turn and faced me. The movements had the same awkward, jerky quality I'd seen in the classroom.

I guess she needs a moment to get used to it.

"Huh...?"

No sooner had I had the thought than the action figure started dancing. It re-created the ending from *Prepure* perfectly.

"Whoa...!" I exclaimed. It was like the table was a stage, with the action figure dancing vigorously on it. It looked exactly like the ending dance I'd shown Lauron a few minutes earlier, as smooth as if the character had jumped off the screen.

There wasn't a hint of hesitation or reluctance. The figure's expression didn't change, true enough, but for someone who'd seen the video clip as many times as I had, she even seemed to smile at the right moments.

What's going on here? This is incredible.

I watched the dance vacantly until, after the exact length of the ending theme, the action figure crumpled to the tabletop like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Is that about right?"

Lauron's question didn't sound proud at all, almost disinterested. She sounded like she'd simply shown me something totally normal and unremarkable.

“It was amazing!” I exclaimed, pumping my fist.

It was beyond my wildest dreams. And she’d learned the entire dance just by watching the video a few times. Every single movement. That meant she was more than just good at magic—she had a mean memory, to boot.

“I mean it, seriously, that was great! You’ll be perfect!”

“I’m glad I seem to have satisfied your expectations.”

I was ecstatic, but Lauron still didn’t seem either prideful or humble. She still sounded like none of this meant much to her at all.

So the construction of a life-size doll began. We had found the person to control it. Everything was going just the way I’d imagined—even better, in fact.

That was fantastic. But taking on a whole project like this meant my responsibilities increased dramatically. Petralka had told me to prioritize this and let Minori-san and Hikaru-san handle things at school, but it wasn’t that simple.

Here’s what I mean: in the mornings, I would go to school and conduct otaku training classes just like always; then in the evenings, I would come back home and go to the dwarves’ outbuilding to check on their progress. As each piece was completed—first the head, then the arms, legs, and body, I would point out things that should be refined, then make a note. I also handled all the red tape to get the paint, surface covering, and other supplies from Japan.

And then, after dinner each night, I went over to the castle to report directly to Petralka on the day’s progress. As I’d promised, I was being more proactive about visiting her.

On top of all that, Lauron was staying at our mansion for the time being. I had gotten my hands on some new video clips of 3D models, picked the best ones, and shown them to her so she could continue to practice re-creating their motions with the action figure. When I had some spare time, being a part of these practice sessions was another of my jobs.

...Yeesh. Spelling it all out like that makes me realize just how much I’d taken on.

Anyway, that's where I was at.

"...r."

"...ergh..."

"...-ter?"

"Y-Yeah...?"

"Master?"

"Huh?"

I snapped back to consciousness. All the hazy stuff around me suddenly came back into focus.

"Oh, M-Myusel."

I looked up, and there was Myusel, looking concerned.

Ohh. Her beauty was endlessly multiplied by looking up at her. The worry that wreathed her face only made her more lovely still.

Ah, my blessed eyes! Er, okay, not the time for that.

"Master, if I may say so, if you're going to sleep, I think it would be healthiest for you to go back to your room first."

"Uh... What...?"

I nodded dimly, not really grasping my own situation, and looked around.

Myusel and I were in the dining area. I was sitting in one of the chairs, and Myusel was standing beside me. There were other people there, too. Minori-san and Hikaru-san, Elvia and Lauron. Brooke and his wife Cerise. They were all staring at me.

"Oh, uh... did I fall asleep?"

"Yes, sir." Myusel nodded. "It would be terrible if you caught a cold. If you're going to sleep, maybe your bed would be—"

"No, uh, I'm okay." I shook my head gently from side to side, trying to clear away the fog. "How long was I out?"

"Maybe ten minutes?" Minori-san said, glancing at her watch. "We all ate, Myusel came in to start cleaning up, and you were off to dreamland."

When I looked down at the table, I saw that indeed, there weren't many plates left on it.

Yikes. I really just conked out.

I had fallen asleep playing online games in the past, but never during a meal. It only went to show how tired I really was.

Elvia looked at me, equally concerned. "You sure you're okay, Shinichi-

sama?" When I saw her usually sunny face clouded with worry, it made me realize how obvious my fatigue must have been to everyone else.

"I guess I'm okay for the moment. Thanks."

"You have been working awful hard lately," Minori-san said with a half smile.

"Master, if you like, I can bring you a drink that will help with your tiredness..."

"Thanks, Myusel. But I'm fine for now." I forced myself to smile.

I was touched by everyone's concern. I suddenly felt like maybe I could understand those breadwinners who tragically died of overwork. It was like, the more concerned everyone was for you, the more you wanted to repay that thoughtfulness by working hard. I guess that wasn't a good thing in the long run.

"Look, if you're really that tired, you should go to bed early," Minori-san said, like a solicitous older sister.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll at least make sure I don't fall asleep at school."

"Speaking of school," Hikaru-san said, "have you heard?" Until then, he had just been listening to the conversation with a small smile on his face, but now he spoke up.

"Heard what? Something about the school?" I asked.

"The students were saying—" and here he cocked his head, maybe trying to remember exactly what he'd heard—"that recently when they use magic, something kind of strange happens."

"What's that about?" It was the first I'd heard of it. Or maybe I'd heard of it, and then forgotten while I was asleep.

"Apparently the effect varies from place to place."

"You mean like... magical rampage?"

"It sounds less like overpowering and more like they can't quite use the magic."

"Hmm?"

They couldn't use magic? What was going on here?

I knew that if you happened to be right up close to a dragon, which was part sprite, any magical power you released would be absorbed—basically, eaten—by the dragon, and your spell wouldn't work. Surely there wasn't some huge True Drake hanging out near Marinos, was there?

If there was a dragon anywhere near school, we would have known

about it sooner—the whole area would have been in an uproar long before we were reduced to speculating on rumors about what had happened to all the magic.

"Does this sort of thing happen often?" I asked, turning to Myusel.

She looked surprised to suddenly be drawn into the conversation, but after a moment she shook her head hesitantly and said, "I've never heard of it. It would seem to suggest that the sprites in that place, the magical power released by nature, have decreased for some reason, but..."

"But you don't think that's really possible?"

"I doubt it. Oh, but then again, a dragon or other large, part-sprite creature in the area could cause an effect like that. But only if you were right near them..."

"And people would notice if there was a dragon traipsing through the capital."

"Yes, sir."

"Then what, I wonder." I cocked my head—which happened to bring Lauron into view.

She was fidgeting with her place settings, moving the cups and plates so they were next to others of the same type. She wasn't just piling things together so they were easy to clean up. It was more like she was... rearranging them.

"Something wrong, Lauron?"

Was she... looking for something?

She didn't look up at me as she shook her head. "No... It's just that these dishes..."

As she murmured, she finished fiddling with the settings and nodded in satisfaction. The cups and plates were now all the exact same distance apart from each other.

"Oh... I'm sorry, I'll clean those up right away, so please, just leave them!" Myusel insisted when she saw what Lauron had done.

Maybe she thought Lauron was implicitly criticizing her for having put off the cleanup to talk with us. Myusel rushed off to the kitchen, coming back with a cart onto which she quickly loaded the empty dinnerware.

My maid—always such a hard worker. It made me feel warm and fuzzy inside to watch her.

I could still see Lauron out of the corner of my eye, though, and she still

looked a bit put out about something. She was usually so expressionless—like her face had the potential to assume an infinite variety of looks—that a small change like this was noticeable.

"Lauron?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

"Starting by piling up the biggest plates, and finishing by cleaning up the glasses, would be the most efficient thing."

"Oh, uh, is—is that right?" I was a bit taken aback by her serious attempt at an explanation. True, Myusel had gotten a bit flustered and was picking up table settings sort of willy-nilly, but still. "It looks like she's getting everything just fine to me..."

At that, Lauron blinked, as if surprised. "I... I see... I'm sorry..." She cast her eyes down again; she sounded apologetic. Her voice suddenly took on that slightly lost quality, her words sort of trailing off.

What was the story here?

I was a little worried about what was going on with Lauron, but I hesitated to press her, and ultimately I didn't say anything else about it that day.

Most fantasy stories depict dwarves as sprite-people who are exceptionally good at working with metal. The world I was in seemed to be no exception to the rule. As amazing as it had been to see Brooke put up the workshop in three days flat, the dwarves now working in it were even more incredible.

Just three days after they started working, and they'd already had a functioning prototype.

They weren't just making a statue, remember. An action figure has a bunch of moving parts; it's almost a type of machine. And because it was going to be Petralka's body double, it would need to be capable of things like opening its mouth and blinking. Any one part out of place could have sent the whole thing haywire, yet the dwarves had assembled it almost by feel.

Of course, it was still a prototype. There were some issues that meant it couldn't be offered up for actual use; I took a look at it and consulted with

the dwarves about what to change. But frequently, it would be less than three days before a new prototype was ready, reflecting my suggestions.

All told, it took less than two weeks after starting on the doll. Half a month to safely complete Petralka's kagemusha.

We immediately contacted Eldant Castle, applying for an audience to show the finished product to Petralka and the others. "We," incidentally, being me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san, along with Romilda and the dwarves who had created the double.

The dwarves wore identical expressions of concern as a knight led us through the halls of the castle. Despite a handful of dwarves who were treated as nobility, most of them were simply seen as demi-humans, and therefore socially inferior to humans. Most of them had never been in the castle. A handful of the dwarves involved in this body-double project had been part of the moviemaking effort earlier, but even they had only come as far as the courtyard—everyone was naturally anxious about an imperial audience.

The audience chamber we were shown to wasn't the small room I was used to giving my reports in. It was much, much bigger. Several times bigger, I would guess, and vastly more opulent.

I was starting to sympathize with the nervous dwarves.

"Wait, is this..."

I was almost certain it was the room I'd been led to the very first time I had come to Eldant Castle. That took me back.

Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I stood in a row, with the dwarves lined up behind us. I heard something behind me and looked back to find that the dwarves had collectively fallen to their knees and bowed their heads. Oh, right. I'd been told to greet Petralka the same way that first day. I had almost completely forgotten about it, since Petralka insisted I not be formal with her.

"Shinichi-kun," Minori-san said, tugging on my arm. I realized she was bowing just like the dwarves. So was Hikaru-san. I let her pull me down so I was on my knees like everyone else. "We're not alone today," she reminded me.

Oh, right. As chummy as we normally were, I was still dealing with the empress. And today, we had to stand on ceremony for the dwarves' sake. At least, that's what I figured was going on.

Petralka's voice reached us: "We appreciate your work on our behalf." My head was down, so I couldn't actually see her, but I could easily imagine her sitting on her throne with her legs crossed. "Raise your heads."

Slowly, we all looked up in accordance with the royal command.

There she was, just like I'd pictured her, arms and legs crossed at the exact angles I'd imagined as she sat on her throne. Beside her stood Garius and Prime Minister Zahar, also as I'd imagined.

"We are told the doll is complete."

"Yes, Majesty," Minori-san replied. "Just last night."

"Mm!" Petralka nodded, unable to hide the curiosity on her face. At the same time, some knights came forward carrying a largish, plain wood box just about big enough for a person—to put it bluntly, it looked a bit like a coffin—and set it in front of the throne.

"Open it."

"Ma'am!" One of the knights stepped back and removed the lid.

Inside, we could see... a girl. A girl with long, beautiful silver hair, lying inside the box. Her lovely, delicate hands were folded at the neckline of her indigo dress. Her eyes were closed, the lashes long, like a sleeping princess in a fairytale. She looked identical to the young woman who sat on the throne.

“Ho...!” Petralka’s eyes went wide to see how perfect it was. Garius and Prime Minister Zahar looked from the box to the empress several times, the figure apparently far more convincing than they had expected.

Good, all good. I smiled in satisfaction.

Truth be told, I had been pretty shocked myself when I’d seen the finished product for the first time the night before. Yes, I had been head of production and had seen the doll go through both a very un-Petralka-like prototype phase and then increasingly convincing renditions—but even so. I thought if you put Petralka in the same dress and a similar box, and lined the two boxes up, even the people who knew her best wouldn’t be able to pick out the real empress.

“Ho...!” Petralka repeated, her eyes shining as she stood up from her throne.

“Magnificent!” she declared.

“It’s an honor, Your Majesty,” one dwarf said humbly, bowing again. The speaker was Rydel Guld—Romilda’s father.

“It almost seems to have Your Majesty’s own air of wisdom,” Zahar said.

“I’m not confident I could tell them apart if they were standing side by side,” Garius added. Their comments could hardly have been higher praise. Frankly, I had wondered if they would complain that it looked too much like a dead body and was unsettling, so this was a happy surprise.

“It is more than we expected,” Petralka said. “However...” Her eyebrows furrowed. “Could you not perhaps have made the bust just a *little* larger?”

“Huh? I kind of thought we had,” I said without thinking—and Petralka fixed me with a look that could kill.

Ugh. When am I going to learn to keep my mouth shut?

I thought I was about to receive another royal right hook, but, maybe restrained by the presence of the dwarves and her various attendants, Petralka merely coughed and changed the subject.

“Well, then—is it safe to take it out of the box?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Excellent! Then unpack it and stand it before us!” Petralka ordered the knights. They extracted the life-size doll from the crate with the utmost care, as if they were handling something very fragile. I guess considering—as I’ve mentioned repeatedly—the fact that the doll looked exactly like

Petralka, they probably hesitated to treat it as just a thing. In fact, they looked downright reverent as they stood the replica before the empress. Unfortunately for them, it looked like it was going to fall over the moment they let go of it.

"Oh, here, this goes like this..." I walked over, widening the doll's stance a little, changing the angle of the hips. Hrmm. Have I mentioned how lifelike this doll was? I was touching its leg, and it sort of felt like I was touching the real Petralka's leg—in other words, like I was basically committing a crime. That made me a little reluctant, myself.

"Maybe this will do the trick?" I muttered, and the knights let go.

And it stood! Petralka stayed standing!

I privately felt like a girl yodeling in the Alps.

But then...

"Huh?"

My elation only lasted for a second. I guess I hadn't done the job as well as I thought, because the Petralka doll slowly tipped forward—and then fell square on top of me.

"Grrgh?!" I exclaimed as Petralka—or rather, her doppelgänger—squished me. "It's... It's so heavy..." I grunted. It was crushing my chest.

As small and light as the doll looked, the metal bones and complicated mechanicals actually made it pretty heavy. We hadn't taken any official measurements, but I would say it weighed... well, plenty.

"What do you mean, heavy!" Petralka bellowed. "Are you calling us fat?!"

"I—I'm not talking about you, Petralka, I mean the doll..."

The dwarves, who did know how heavy the thing was, must have decided that I was going to suffocate if they didn't do something, because two of them came forward and lifted the doll off me.

This time, they stood it up. Leave it to the people who made it to know how to get the balance right. Now two Petralkas stood before us, neither of them listing dangerously.

When the doll was standing properly, it was even harder to tell the two of them apart. I really was seriously impressed with the craftsmanship.

"Uh, anyway," I ventured, "do you like it?"

"Mm. It is indeed fine work, there is no question." Petralka nodded.

"I sure think so. Dwarf construction is something else, huh? Granted, we

got the covering from Japan, but they managed to cram enough joints in there that it can move almost exactly like a human being...”

“Plus, it can transform, too.”

“Yeah, and it can transform, too, so— Wait a second!” I wheeled on Romilda, who had whispered the addendum to me. “Since when can it transform?!”

I had been at the worksite virtually every day, but I didn’t know anything about that! How could they have added a huge chunk of functionality without me, the overseer, having any idea?!

Jeez! Dwarves weren’t just demi-human—they were superhuman.

Okay, hold on, maybe this wasn’t the time to be getting lost in admiration.

“Huh? But—” Romilda looked surprised. “It’s what you taught us, Sensei. Robots transform.”

“That’s only *giant* robots!”

“Whaaat?!” Romilda took a trembling step back, her eyes wide.

“What’s wrong, Romilda?” her father, Rydel, whispered to her.

“Dad, it sounds like it didn’t need to transform after all...”

“What’s that?!” Mr. Guld sounded every bit as shocked as his daughter. “But Romilda, you insisted—”

I guess the whole thing had been at Romilda’s instigation. Whatever weird ideas she had suggested to her father, they had made their way through him into the project. The other dwarves were looking at each other, realizing too late that they had gone above and beyond in the most ridiculous way possible.

Ahh. It was starting to make sense to me.

These dwarves were professional craftsmen. And craftsmen like to test themselves, like to pour their hearts and souls into their work. Plus, they already understood the basics of how to make a machine transform from working on the Faldra, so...

“What would people think if the empress transformed right in front of them?!”

“Oh, uh... I thought maybe they would think it was really cool.”

It was dawning on me that Romilda was maybe not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

“Then everyone would know for *sure* she wasn’t the real empress!”

“Not true,” Hikaru-san (so uninvolved in this matter) whispered to me. “They might worship her as some new kind of god.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever—!”

Look, I think Romilda made an innocent mistake, but Hikaru-san—you’re doing this on purpose!

What exactly did this doll even transform into? Could it fly? Was any kind of cannon involved? Or did it have a beast mode? Whatever, that would explain why it was so darn heavy!

“Er, anyway, if you *don’t* have it transform, it’ll just look like this!” I said and chuckled, trying to make the best of things as Petralka and her attendants looked at me with sincere doubt. Sometimes all you can do is laugh, right?

Ugh. Just give it up, Shinichi.

A while later, after everyone had had plenty of time to admire the product, I walked up to the doll and gave it a pat on the back, just to emphasize how great it was.

“Hrm...?” Petralka and the others watched me with surprise, apparently not understanding what I was doing.

Unfortunately, the pat on the back caused the Petralka doll to lose its balance again, and it—

“Eep?!”

—didn’t fall over.

As everyone looked on in shock, it opened its eyes and thrust a leg forward to catch itself.

“Goodness!”

In fact, it kept moving after that. With its hands at its sides, it turned its hips and bowed its head. And then, as smooth as anything, it started to dance.

Just as we had planned, when the *Prepure* ending theme started playing through my phone, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and the dwarves all stepped back.

The room was filled with music, and the doll danced along.

“Oh ho...!” Petralka, and even Prime Minister Zahar and Garius, leaned forward to get a closer look. In fact, the members of the royal guard even seemed totally absorbed as they watched the Petralka look-alike do the adorable, vigorous dance from the TV show.

Turn! Turn! Arms wide, and—jump!

The song, just ninety seconds or so long, seemed to be over in a flash, and ended with the doll striking the final pose, leaving her audience to stare in total silence.

It was Garius who broke the quiet at last. “Truly spectacular.”

Petralka looked around the audience chamber. “Who has done this?” She seemed to apprehend immediately that the doll had been controlled with magic, and she must have been looking for the magic-user.

Good. All the effort had been worth an effect like this.

I smiled, and nodded at Guld-san. “Would you do the introductions?”

“Lauron,” he said, and a girl stepped forward from where she had been hidden behind the other dwarves. She was never very expressive, but there was evident anxiousness on her face now—only natural in the presence of Her Majesty the Empress, I suppose.

“Lauron Selioz. She’s young, but she is a full craftsman in the Guld Workshop.”

Lauron didn’t say anything, but faced Petralka and the others and gave a single deep bow.

Lauron’s magical abilities were staggering, there was no question. But don’t take my word for it. As absolute ruler, Petralka had probably seen her fair share of magic-users. Garius and Zahar presumably had, too—and they were all stunned. That had to mean Lauron was some kind of genius.

There was one thing, though. We had reached the point where the doll moved as smoothly as a real human being, but that was it. To achieve our ultimate objective, substituting it for Petralka, the doll would have to move like Petralka, and that would take more practice.

The mansion wasn’t going to be a convenient base anymore. That meant moving into the room that had been prepared for me here at the castle, as well as getting the cooperation of Petralka herself.

“Mm. Is this everyone?” Petralka said, looking around at the people gathered in the room. That included me, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Lauron, along with Romilda (who was there as Lauron’s assistant), and

even the elf Loek, who would help to take us to another level of Petralka-ishness.

Just as dwarves tend to be talented in earth-related magic, elves in general are superb with spells that use wind—or more specifically, air. And sound is caused by waves of oscillations traveling through the air. So I thought maybe wind magic, appropriately applied, could even help us change someone's voice. I checked with an elf I knew—namely, Loek—and he said it could be done, so I added him to the roll of people involved with this project.

Loek and Romilda each looked at each other out of the corner of their eye. Neither said anything. Normally the pair argued nonstop, but here in Eldant Castle, discussing a political matter in front of the empress herself, it looked like they were either too nervous or too smart to start in with each other.

"Let us begin, then." Petralka turned her gaze, naturally, upon the life-size replica of herself, which was sitting in a chair at the center of the room. The two of them right next to each other practically looked like twins. If the doll were to start moving, to put its hands together and dance or something, it would be almost impossible to tell which of them was which.

None of us spoke. Lauron and all of us waited for Her Majesty to give orders. But then—

"Shinichi." Petralka looked directly at me.

"Yes?"

"Will you not give the orders already?"

"Er...?"

Petralka put her hands on her hips. "'Er?' is not the answer we seek. We have charged you as our educational adjunct, Shinichi. As such, it is naturally you who would give the orders now."

Geez, really? With the regal note of "Let us begin, then," I just assumed the empress would be the one telling people what to do.

"Ohh... Huh. Okay..." First I turned to Loek. "For starters, I'm going to prioritize Lauron's work on the movements, but maybe you could go ahead and just take a shot at changing the voice. It's our first time, so just see what you can do."

"Yes, sir," Loek said. He spoke readily, but his expression was stiff—couldn't quite beat the nerves, I guess.

“And then... Petralka.”

“Hm? Us?” She sounded surprised. Maybe she’d thought she would just be observing.

“Could you walk a little bit for us? I want to have Lauron imitate you. Once she can replicate something you’re actually doing, then we can move on to having her choose the motions.”

“Mm. Understood.” Petralka walked to the middle of the room. Her movements were suffused with absolute elegance, like a noble girl at a ball. I guess, in a way, she was a noble girl—being the empress and all.

“Hmm,” I found myself muttering. “That’s not quite right.”

“What is not right?” Petralka asked (she must have overheard me), stopping where she was and looking annoyed.

“Just act normal,” I said.

“Is that not what we were doing?”

“Not quite...”

How could I put this? She was a little too aware of her audience, and was taking extra care, trying to present her best self.

“You usually puff your chest out a little more when you walk, right?” I said. “Like, *Important person, coming through!*”

I thrust my chest forward and walked around to demonstrate, Petralka watching me with undisguised displeasure. “W-We do not walk in such a bizarre fashion!”

“You’ve gotta look—what’s the word?—more self-centered.”

“Who are you calling self-centered!”

“W-Wait, you never realized?!” I exclaimed, once again unfortunately speaking my mind.

The next instant, Garius and Prime Minister Zahar both exploded.

“Why are you *laughing*?!” Petralka demanded, getting angrier and angrier.

Most people would cringe and cower when they realized they had upset their absolute monarch, but Garius (who *was* a relative of Petralka’s, after all) kept up the uncharacteristic merriment as he answered, “Oh, it’s merely that one can’t quite deny the logic of Shinichi’s statement...”

“Garius!” Petralka said, stomping her foot and turning beet red. It looked both youthful and adorable—that was our empress for you.

“Well, anyway, just relax and act normal. Please. If we don’t practice

imitating you how you usually move, it'll defeat the point."

"Hrm..." Petralka puffed out her cheeks but, maybe understanding just how important this "training" was, didn't object further. *Again*, I urged, and Petralka started walking slowly around the room, looking a bit more like her usual self this time.

"Ready, Lauron?" I asked the dwarf.

"Yes, sir, I'm ready."

No sooner had she answered than the Petralka doll jumped up from the chair as if it had a spring in its behind. The movement didn't look remotely human, but a few seconds later, the double lined up alongside Petralka as she marched around and began imitating her movements.

The length of each step. The swing of the arms. The direction of the gaze. Bit by bit, Lauron brought the doll's movements closer to Petralka's example.

"Excellent, just like that," I said, talking to both Lauron and Petralka.

That was the beginning of Lauron's training in imitating Her Majesty the Empress, Petralka an Eldant III.

Still, though. We couldn't exactly stay at Eldant Castle twenty-four-seven. Thus Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I went back home. Lauron, for her part, had been cooped up at our house since she arrived—but here between phases of the project, we decided to send her back home for a little while, too.

And so, for the first time in a couple of weeks, the dinner table looked like it normally did.

Minori-san and Hikaru-san were there, of course, but so were Myusel, Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise. Things had been so hectic lately that we'd hardly had time to sit down and enjoy one of Myusel's homemade meals.

"I'm glad it seems like it's going to go well, though," I said, thinking back on Lauron's work as I ate.

"That's wonderful," Myusel said with a smile. As usual, she looked almost as pleased as if it were her work, not mine. Her smile had become sort of a barometer of success for me.

“I don’t quite get it, but I wish I coulda been there to see it,” said Elvia, looking at me with curiosity in her eyes as she shoveled food into her mouth. She looked a bit like a kid begging a parent for an unusual toy. Admittedly, it was still pretty cute.

“Sorry, I don’t really think we could do that...” Elvia being technically a Bahairamanian spy and all. “What with the dwarves switching from prototyping to mass production, things have calmed down a little, at least. I think we can all take a breath now. Thanks, everyone, for everything.”

The development phase of the body-double doll was over already. All that was left was the production of spare parts—and that just meant repeating familiar work, so there was less need for me to observe or give instructions. Again, since this was sort of a natural place to pause, I had told the dwarves to go home for the time being.

The whole project had really put a lot of strain on everybody, but I think it really hit Brooke, Myusel, and Cerise particularly hard. Myusel and Cerise were constantly having to bring food to the dwarves shut up in that shed, clean the guest rooms where they slept, and wash their clothes. Brooke not only built the little outbuilding, but helped bring in additional materials too. All these things were above and beyond everyone’s normal duties.

“If that girl you found can do the job, then we’re all set,” Minori-san said, cutting up some duck meat with a fork and knife. “And offhand, it looks like she’s going to be fine.”

“I’m so glad everything seems to be going well,” I said.

For the moment, all the little details surrounding Petralka’s body double seemed to be coming along smoothly.

Too smoothly, if you asked me. I couldn’t shake an occasional anxiety that I’d missed something.

“If this were a light novel or a manga or something, this is about where we would get the twist—the thing that turns everything else upside down.”

“Stop that, Hikaru-san,” I said, a strained look on my face. He sounded so calm talking about it.

“Don’t worry, I’m just joking.”

“It sounds scary somehow when you say it.”

“Oh yeah?” He sipped his tea, evidently unbothered. But then his face suddenly turned serious and he said, “There is something I keep thinking

about, though."

"Huh? What's that?" I shifted in my seat.

Hikaru-san had originally been sent here by the Japanese government to replace me—to replace someone who didn't listen to them with someone who did. He was an official usurper. Even, in extreme terms, my enemy, fighting for the control of Amutech. A lot had happened, but I had managed to broker an uneasy detente—or so it seemed to me, though I was never completely sure what Hikaru-san thought privately.

"A life-size action figure like that..." Hikaru-san started quietly. "Isn't it basically just a Dutch wi—"

"Okay, that'll be quite enough of that!" I cried, smacking the table. "Why would you just come up with that out of the blue, anyway?! You had me really worried!"

"I'm just looking at it objectively."

"Yes, I know it looks exactly like Petralka in every way, and yes, we built in all the *crucial* parts, but I think it looks even more stimulating than a body pillow, I mean—wait, well, there's no telling what functions Romilda and her friends might have built in without telling anyone, but it's so heavy you definitely wouldn't want it on top of—ugh! No! The point is, you're wrong! You are so wrong!"

That is *not* why we built this thing!

I admit, I could see the resemblance, but it was intended for a totally different purpose, so I claim innocence! Pretty much!

Thus I fulminated both mentally and verbally. But then...

"A dutchwi?" Myusel asked, perplexed.

"Whazzat?" Elvia inquired.

"It's nothing!" I exclaimed. "It's nothing either of you needs to know about!"

It's not for the sweet, innocent minds of virginal young women! That sort of thing is just for private, secret, personal use! I think! Even though I guess some people are putting them in the passenger seats of their cars these days!

"Let me explain."

"Stoppit, Hikaru-san!"

He looked like he was relishing the prospect of enlightening Myusel and Elvia, and I tried desperately to stop him. Anyway, it was bad enough for

Myusel and Elvia to hear this sort of talk, but if Petralka got so much as a whisper of a rumor that the doll was actually a sex toy, they would chop off my head and then throw my body in jail.

I looked to my bodyguard for help. “M-Minori-san! Don’t you say anything either, okay?!”

She, however, had her elbows on the table, fingers interlaced. They hid her mouth as she looked at me. I could almost have mistaken her for someone’s dad—someone’s dad who was the commander of a secret organization, using a humanoid weapon in an effort to instrumentalize humanity.

“Is a male version ready yet?”

“Minori-san...?”

Her glasses flashed dangerously as she spoke. I almost thought I could see a huge black stone slab looming behind her. Maybe it was just my imagination.

“Hello? Earth to Minori-san?”

“Is a male version ready yet?” she repeated. “If we were to prepare two male versions, Real BL would not be beyond our reach... With a Shinichi-kun version, a Hikaru-kun version, and a Minister Cordobal version, the three combined could—”

“Stop it already, will you!”

Just shut up, you rotten girl!

“What? What could they do?”

“Well, let me tell you...”

“Hikaru-san! Don’t tell them that! No filth at meal times!”

Please, Myusel! Please don’t let yourself be polluted! Elvia has her phase—her phase of the moon—and that can’t be helped, but please! Just you alone, please remain my sweet, pure maid-san!

And so on and so forth.

So I was panicking. Minori-san was so rotten she was practically fermenting. Hikaru-san still looked as calm as anything. And Myusel and Elvia were both blinking in confusion.

But we weren’t the only ones at the table.

“Brooke, dear, seconds?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Brooke and Cerise, at least, seemed to be enjoying a pleasant dinner

together.

Anyway, on to the next day. After class, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I went with Myusel, Loek, and Romilda over to Eldant Castle. This, of course, was about Lauron's training.

Why had we brought Myusel? She'd been at school to give some lectures, but since she was here, I wanted her opinion on Lauron's "Petralka-ishness." Despite the massive gap in their social positions, Myusel and Petralka had been pretty good friends since the Assembly of Patriots incident—Myusel at least knew the empress better than Loek or Romilda.

And so...

"I'm *thrilled* to be able to spend some time with you after school, Minori-sensei."

"...Gee, thanks."

"Don't worry, Sensei, when this woodland stalker goes out of control, I'll beat him back into line."

"...Gee, thanks."

I listened to Loek, Romilda, and Minori-san chat as a knight showed us through the castle to the training room.

"Geez, there isn't a space in here that's small, huh?" I said as we walked.

The passageway seemed to go on forever, and we were the only ones in it; and the farther inside we went, the darker it got. Honestly, it was a little scary. I sure as heck wouldn't want to be walking around here by myself in the middle of the night.

The interior looked sort of Middle-Ages European, and it wouldn't have surprised me to find a ghost floating around, or statues that followed you with their eyes, or other weird stuff like that.

"Where are we, anyway...?"

Truth be told, I didn't know this part of the castle very well.

It didn't help that the building was staggeringly huge. The population density here was abysmal. The place was just too big even for all the

nobles, knights, officials, and sundry others who used it. Hence why you could tramp through it for long stretches without seeing anybody.

On top of that, the castle wasn't just the empress's residence. It was also a military structure—a fortress into which everyone could retreat in case of emergency. The interior was more complicated than you would expect, with multiple passageways twisting around and around the same places. If by chance an enemy did break in, they could easily get lost or just waste tons of time trying to find their way around. The castle itself functioned as a sort of maze.

I could get around okay by myself in the areas I knew well. The courtyard, for example, or the audience chambers—places I'd been to often before. But take one step away from the places I knew, and I would probably be lost in the blink of an eye. I didn't think Eldant trusted us enough to just tell us the layout of the entire castle.

Hence, a knightly guide was indispensable.

We had been walking through the castle corridors for nearly fifteen minutes before we finally arrived at our destination.

"We have been waiting for you, Shinichi."

We were greeted by the sight of two Petralkas, sitting in chairs with their legs crossed.

"Er, wha?" I found myself transfixed by the pair of them. They sat side-by-side in matching postures. Even the way their lips curled up in amusement at my reaction was identical.

This went beyond looking like twins. It was like she was sitting next to a mirror.

Lauron, incidentally, was standing against the far wall, watching Petralka. Presumably, she had to have her eyes on her in order to follow what she was doing. I glanced back and found everyone with me looking as shocked as I felt.

"You're identical..." I said, returning my gaze to the Petralkas. "Almost *too* identical. It's kind of disturbing."

"What did you say?!"

My appraisal caused the Petralka on the left to raise her eyebrows and jump up vigorously. A second later, the one on the right did the same.

"Ah, now I know which one's real."

The doll was always going to be a beat behind her human counterpart. A

little conversation, or a slight change of expression, could be handled with minimal delay, but a sudden action like jumping up was always going to produce a hesitation.

Then again, this was probably the only place we were going to see the person and the body double lined up next to each other, so it didn't especially matter.

"Are you mocking us, Shinichi?"

"No, no. I didn't mean it like *that*."

I guess that was the wrong choice of words; both Petralkas glared angrily at me.

"I couldn't tell which was which, you know? So I said something that would get a rise out of you so that I could tell which was the real Petralka by the slight delay in the reaction. Sorry."

"Hrm..."

This seemed to placate Petralka, because she didn't complain any further.

"They really do look identical, don't they?" Minori-san said in admiration. "From a bit of a distance, you literally can't tell them apart."

She was right: it was natural that the doll's facial features and whatever else would look just like Petralka's, because that was how it had been made. But even so, if it had just been standing there, or lying on the ground, it would still have *felt* like a doll. It wouldn't have had this... vitality, this liveliness.

But as Petralka and Lauron had demonstrated moments earlier, when the doll and the human struck the same pose and had the same expression, that doll-ishness all but vanished. I suppose if you were to get your nose right up next to it, you would probably notice some subtle differences. But that was chiefly because the real Petralka was standing right there for comparison. At a glance, from a distance? You'd never be able to tell. And when they started moving, you had to pay attention or you would quickly lose track of which was which. Even we ourselves could hardly say, and we already knew about the doll. People who didn't know about it would never imagine that it was a fake. When Lauron really got Petralka's tics and habits down, I could easily picture the day when I came into the audience chamber and wasn't sure which of them I was dealing with.

"What do you think, Myusel?" I asked the maid standing beside me.

She had seen the doll under construction a few times, but she had never seen it right next to Petralka, let alone moving and expressing itself.

"It's incredible," she breathed. "It really looks like there are two of Her Majesty."

From her tone, I could tell that this wasn't just politeness. The two of them really looked the same to her. Perfect.

"All right, shall we go ahead and get started, then?" I said, and everyone nodded. "Lauron, would you make the doll imitate Petralka?"

"Yes, sir." Lauron nodded.

"Romilda, Myusel, if you notice anything off, speak up. Loek, get your voice-changing magic ready. And Petralka, I want you to just say and do whatever, for Lauron to copy."

With that, everyone but Petralka lined up along the far wall by Lauron, the better to see the doll.

There was a moment of silence. Petralka, with the eyes of everyone in the room focused on her, took a deep breath. She opened her mouth as if to speak. But...

"Hrrn..."

No words came out from between those pink lips. Just a sort of grunt, accompanied by a panicked expression.

"What's wrong?"

"It turns out this is rather difficult to do on command..." Petralka muttered, crossing her arms. An instant later, the doll crossed *its* arms.

And then its lips moved. "It *turrrns* out this is razzer diff*yi*cult to do-on-com-mand."

Hmm. I should have guessed it would also be hard to change someone's voice with wind magic. The words sounded a little awkward. Loek, though, had claimed to me that with a little practice, the speech would become completely natural.

"Just talk like normal," I advised her.

"Hrm..."

"Hrbb..."

"Like, try laughing," I suggested. "*Oh ho ho ho!*"

I thought I was helping, but Petralka didn't look very appreciative. One eyebrow stood up in annoyance.

"We do *not* laugh like that!"

“Huh? You think?”

“Wee do not *laugh* like thad!”

“I think if you take it a little slower on the voice, it’ll sound more regal,” Hikaru-san said.

“...Yes, sir,” Lauron answered. Actually changing the voice was Loek’s job, but Lauron was providing what amounted to the raw material.

“Myusel, Romilda,” I said, “how’s it sound to you?”

This was actually one of the reasons I’d brought Myusel along today: that magic ring. We were able to communicate telepathically using these magical items, but it was a sort of mind-to-mind translation of what was being said. It didn’t work with recordings on machines, or with written letters.

The voice we were hearing was really Lauron’s voice, modified by Loek’s magic. With this magical intermediary, we could hear the sound of the voice, but it wouldn’t carry over into the translation. Of course, Minori-san and I both had at least a working knowledge of spoken Eldant, but things like tone and inflection escaped us. Hence why we needed the opinion of a native speaker of the language.

“I’m sorry,” Romilda said, “but it just sounds like Lauron talking to me.”

“That’s nonsense! Are you saying my magic isn’t getting the job done?!”

“I didn’t say that! I just said what it sounded like to *me*!” Loek was furious, and Romilda was thoroughly annoyed. “Yes, it sounds a little different, but I talk with Lauron a lot, and I know her quirks. She might sound funny, but she still sounds like Lauron.”

“...I agree,” Myusel said apologetically. “I’ve had the honor of hearing Her Majesty speak several times now... But if I had to compare this to those occasions...”

“No dice, huh?” I sighed.

Lauron’s performance looked like our bottleneck now. Once Loek had the magic worked out—once he understood the basics of how to change the voice—we wouldn’t need to make further modifications based on the situation. We could just stuff it into a magical item.

But the doll, acting as Petralka’s body double, would need to be able to answer basic questions. The overall quality of the voice was one thing, but

the nuances were something we couldn't augment with magic.

"It's starting to look like the talking is going to be the hardest part," I said.

"It's possible we could get someone else specifically to do the voice," Hikaru-san said.

Then, to our collective surprise, there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Petralka said, implicitly pausing our practice.

"It is I, Your Majesty."

"Garius. Enter."

"Majesty." The door opened even as he spoke, and the silver-haired knight came in.

"What is wrong?"

"An urgent matter requires your attention."

"We are over here."

"...How rude of me." Garius, who had been addressing the doll, gave a discreet cough and turned to the real Petralka. "We implore you to return with us," he said softly.

"Hmm?" Petralka pursed her lips. Incidentally, so did the puppet standing next to her.

"Majesty..." Garius said pleadingly.

"There appears no choice," Petralka said with a sigh. "We must excuse ourselves for the time being. The rest of you, do not forbear to practice in our absence."

Then she and Garius left the room.

Okay, understandable. I could have seen this coming. Petralka was the empress. No matter how carefully she arranged her schedule, there was always going to be a mountain of business to attend to. Frankly, I expected plenty more interruptions like this in the future.

"All right, well, Lauron, how about you just start imitating Petralka doing whatever?"

I looked at Lauron... but she didn't move. She didn't seem to be using magic; the Petralka figure was just standing there motionless.

"What's wrong?" Hikaru-san asked the frozen dwarf.

"Um..." Lauron blinked and looked at Hikaru-san, sounding lost. Then she looked at me. She wore her usual detached expression—but was it my imagination, or did she look upset?

“When you say... doing whatever... what exactly do you mean...?”

“Huh...? Oh, right.” I realized my instructions had been a little too vague. Fair enough. She had only just started training—maybe suddenly saying “just make it like Petralka” was a bit much to ask. Even Petralka had had trouble when I’d told her to just act like herself.

“Hmm, uh, okay, could you walk from the chair to the wall and back, then sit down again?”

“Understood.” Lauron nodded, then raised her arms and pointed her palms at the Petralka figure. She spent a second intoning a spell, and then Petralka’s feet began to move. She walked to the wall, turned around, and swinging her arms like a marching soldier, she went back to the chair and sat again.

“Was that... to your satisfaction?”

“Hrm...”

For a second, I wasn’t sure what to say. Sure, she’d done exactly what I asked. To the wall, come back, sit down. On target as far as it went, but... But...

“It just didn’t *feel* like Petralka...”

The problem was bigger than that, in fact. Not only did it not feel like Petralka, it didn’t feel *human*: the movements had looked just like a puppet’s. Like a machine that looked human. You could practically hear the gears clanking.

So I stood there, not sure how to answer—not sure how to explain.

I was saved when Hikaru-san, who had been watching from the wall, took a step forward. “You’re imitating the empress, so I think when she walks, she should puff out her chest and look a little more important.” He strutted to demonstrate. Fists clenched, chest out, marching in place.

Lauron watched silently, then gave a small nod and started moving the doll. Just the way Hikaru-san had shown her—exactly. Now it looked plenty human. In fact, it was like having another Hikaru-san standing right...

Huh?

I was starting to get an unpleasant feeling. Could this be...?

“I think she sort of crosses her legs when she sits. You could try that,” Hikaru-san said, back in his place by the wall.

“Switch your legs back and forth a few times,” Minori-san added.

“Understood,” Lauron said, nodding again, and again the puppet started moving. Petralka’s look-alike seated herself in the chair once more—awkwardly and mechanically—and crossed her legs. But something was obviously wrong. It was like her energy was in the wrong places.

“Switch... several times...” Lauron murmured. As she did so, the puppet crossed its legs. A few seconds later, it recrossed them. Then a few seconds later, it did it again. And a few seconds after that...

“Okay, whoa, stop, stop!” I called, waving my arms. “Just crossing and uncrossing your legs forever is super weird, right?!”

She looked set to keep shifting positions at precise intervals pretty much all day. And wasn’t that practically the definition of mechanical? And there was something off about the way the doll looked with its legs crossed. Like, normally when you cross your legs, the upper leg sort of rests on the lower one, with the lower leg supporting the weight of the upper one. But that wasn’t what the doll was doing. It had the basic action down, but its strength seemed to be distributed evenly throughout its body. It was almost like it was forcing itself to hold a pose.

“What? But... you said to cross and uncross the legs...”

“Okay, yes, we did! But there’s a limit to these things!”

Lauron furrowed her brow, seemingly deep in thought.

I should have guessed.

The exact reason for that unpleasant feeling I’d had was becoming clear to me.

Earlier, Lauron had been able to imitate Petralka’s movements when she’d been physically there as a model. But she hadn’t absorbed those movements and taken them into herself; she hadn’t needed to. She just needed to copy what was in front of her.

But what about when you took the model away?

In other words, when you’re not copying, but reproducing...

Like, say there was a math problem. The teacher solves it, the student sees them do it and learns the answer, so the next time the same problem comes up, they can give the right response. But they don’t really understand the problem; they’ve just learned by rote what the teacher showed them. So when it comes to a different problem, when they have to apply the idea, they’re lost.

Or pretend someone likes the work of a certain illustrator, and all they

do is copy that person's pictures. After making hundreds or thousands of copies, they can reproduce that illustrator's work at a level that's indistinguishable from the original—but they still don't necessarily understand character anatomy, or how to put flesh on a design; they've just specialized in copying 2D points and lines. So that person still wouldn't be able to produce an original work in the illustrator's style. They could only imitate what had already been created.

"You've seen Her Majesty up close a number of times now, right?" Hikaru-san said to Lauron. "Did you never notice at all how she walks or sits?"

"I did..."

"Sure you did. So just imitate what you saw, right? What's so hard about that?"

"H-Hikaru-san..." I said. He didn't sound especially critical, but you could never tell how a person was going to take something. "Maybe you could be just a little more... gentle..."

"Gentle? What?" he said, blinking in confusion.

Hikaru-san is so smooth in so many ways that I think he may not fully grasp the feelings of people who aren't as socially adept as he is. To say *this should be obvious, so why aren't you doing it?* might just be an innocent question in his eyes, but the socially maladroit might feel like they're being made fun of or even attacked.

I had grown up with a light novel author for a dad and a game artist for a mother—in other words, with a couple of creative types—so I was well aware of the gulf between people who "could do" and people who couldn't.

What Hikaru-san was saying wasn't wrong—but it wasn't going to help solve the problem, either.

"Okay, okay," Minori-san broke in with a wry smile, as if to say, *Let's all calm down*. Hikaru-san didn't look thrilled, but he backed off, and then we all looked again at Lauron.

And I boggled.

"Wha—"

Lauron was standing there with her eyes full of tears, her whole body shaking.

"...oh..." A tiny sound escaped her. It was almost like she was trying to stifle a cough—but instead, it turned out to be the signal for a total

breakdown. Huge tears rolled down her cheeks, and she let out one wracking sob after another.

"I don't... understand... I don't understand... Why..."

"Whoa, whoa, uhh!"

Why? That's what *I* wanted to ask! But I was afraid that would sound too critical, so instead I just took a few steps closer to her.

"Y-You don't have to get it right away. It's your first time and all!" I said, but Lauron just rubbed at her eyes and continued to cry.

Ahhhh. What to do, what to do? I hate when girls cry...!

I was just about at the end of my rope.

"Uhh, uhhh, uhhh, I've got it! This is Hikaru-san's fault!"

When in doubt, start with the classic: blame someone else.

"What?! How is this my fault?!" Hikaru-san exclaimed, sounding uncharacteristically unsettled. I'm sure he hadn't expected Lauron to burst out sobbing, either. She had always seemed so stoic, and she was good at magic and very serious. Maybe that had given us the mistaken impression that she was just an unflappable hard worker. We had never imagined that she might also be so vulnerable.

Ohh, for— What am I gonna do?

"Uh, umm... Okay, let's all take a break! Take five! Im'a use the bathroom—see ya!"

Maybe it was the tense situation that inspired my sudden need to answer nature's call. Whatever the case, it was the perfect excuse to flee the room.

There's a relatively well-known story about the Palace of Versailles: that at first, it didn't have any separate bathrooms.

Maybe that seems obvious enough. Before the development of sewage pipes and bathrooms with running water, the pit latrine was the most common method of collecting waste, which would then be used as fertilizer.

In Middle-Ages Europe, I've heard, human waste was typically thrown away in courtyards or in the street.

And remember what I said about the Eldant Empire being a lot like Middle-Ages Europe?

The “toilets” in our mansion were... yep. Pit latrines.

That was manageable when you were in a one-story building, or when there were toilets on just one floor... But when it came to a massive, complex structure like Eldant Castle, things got a lot more complicated.

For a serviceable pit latrine, you need some height. You can’t just flush the waste away like with a flushing toilet. Build a bunch of toilets above each other on each floor, and it would just come straight down on the head of the guy beneath, which would not only be stinky and unsanitary but downright psychologically damaging. In light of how many people needed to use the toilet in a building this big, the sheer amount of waste was no laughing matter, either.

So how *did* the toilets work in this castle? They were... surprisingly cutting edge, actually.

The toilets were mostly located around the outside edge of the castle, in order to make it easier to bring in air from outside (or so I was told). Believe it or not, they had toilet-specialist mages whose whole job was to periodically gust magical wind through the bathrooms. The wind would go down into the areas where waste was collected along the outer wall, helping to both keep down the smell and disperse the humidity, as well as dry out the contents of the waste collection vessels and tamp down the material. It virtually eliminated the smell.

People charged with waste collection would then take this stuff and use it for fertilizer. The whole process had apparently been systematized.

I have to admit, I was pretty impressed when I first heard about all this. Not that doing your business at Eldant Castle was exactly fun. As I’ve written, the toilets were mostly towards the outer wall, and the passageways running around the castle were plenty complicated... So if you had a real emergency but didn’t know your way around, you could waste a lot of time rushing around the hallways.

And thus I found myself...

“Sigh...” I sighed as I walked down the hall.

Where the heck am I?

I had no idea, let alone any sense of how to get back to the room I’d come from.

I was completely and totally lost.

I remembered the same thing happening at the workshop and realized to

my chagrin that getting hopelessly lost was becoming something of a routine with me. I wasn't even especially bad with directions, but here we were. The castle was just too big for me. I was amazed Petralka and the others could get around *without* getting lost.

I was looking around, hoping I would find someone I could ask for directions, but unfortunately I didn't see anyone. The twists and turns of the hallways made it hard to see very far, and a palpable silence reigned in the corridors. It was enough to make you wonder if the building was actually abandoned. You got the impression that the castle was too big and the number of guards too small.

"Hmmm..."

Would just walking around at random get me back? No... Walking around at random was part of what had gotten me lost at the workshop. I've been told that the best thing to do if you're lost is to stay where you are, so I resolved not to move and just wait until everyone noticed I hadn't come back and came looking for me.

Then again, the castle was a closed environment. If I walked enough, maybe I would wander into a part of it I recognized? The simplest way of solving a maze is to put your hand on the wall and never let go, and just keep walking. I had read somewhere that eventually, you would get to an exit. Although considering it was a bit of a needle-in-a-haystack method, it seemed like it could take an awful lot of time.

I was reflecting on these things as I wandered through the castle, when suddenly I found myself in front of a huge door.

"Huh...?"

It was *really* big, and looked sturdy to boot. Probably pretty thick, I had to imagine. It looked even more impenetrable than the doors to the audience chamber, though it was noticeably free of decoration. This door didn't need a *Do Not Enter* sign: it pretty much was one. What in the world was behind it?

Could I have found the Eldant treasury?! But it was awfully plain for that...

"Who's there?!"

"Hagh?!"

I had only casually rested my hand on the door when I was caught by an angry shout. I turned around to find two soldiers in light armor, swords at

their hips, one to the left and one to the right as if to keep me pinned. Each was reaching for his sword already, clearly prepared to kill.

What was going on here? Had I stumbled into some real trouble? Tripped some kind of trap?!

"Get away from the door!"

"Huh? Oh, yes, absolutely!" I pulled my hand back and all but jumped away from the door.

The soldiers didn't look entirely satisfied, though; they kept watchful eyes on me as they approached.

The soldier to my right growled, "Listen, filth, what do you think you're __"

But the guy on the left stopped him. "Hey, hold on, this kid—I mean, this man is..."

And then an instant later someone was bellowing at the top of their lungs: "*What* is going on here?!"

I looked down the hall to see a silver-haired girl approaching at long strides. Behind her came two bodyguards.

"Your Majesty!" the soldiers said, bowing hurriedly.

"P-Petralka..."

"We go out of our way to conclude quickly, and this is what we find? What is this?" she demanded of the soldiers.

"M-Majesty, this kid, he—"

"Kid?" Petralka narrowed her eyes. "He is a distinguished and important guest of our empire—and you call him 'this kid'?"

"N-No, Majesty! Th-This honored personage had his hand on the door of the storeroom, so—"

Both of the soldiers were shaking in their boots in front of Petralka. Most likely, they were charged with protecting whatever was on the other side of the door, and had come rushing from some nearby guard post when they saw someone they didn't recognize going past. In other words, they were just doing their job. That they didn't recognize me was just a bit of bad luck on their part. Honestly, I felt kind of sorry for them.

"Er, Petralka, these men were just—"

"We know." Petralka sighed, then spoke to the two soldiers. "We praise your faithfulness to your duty. But we wish you would judge with cooler heads."

“Y-Yes, yes, Majesty!” The men kowtowed.

Petralka gestured me over to her. “Shinichi, this is a place you must not approach too lightly.”

“No?”

“First, back away.” She took me by the wrist and pulled me away from the door. With no particular reason to resist, I let her tow me along but... *B-But Petralka-san, your hand!*

Her hand grasping my wrist somehow managed to make my face feel hot. As someone whose years of not having a girlfriend were precisely equal to his years of being alive, I found myself a little bit excited just holding hands with a girl like this. Especially one as cute as Petralka.

“G-Gosh, I’m sorry, I got lost...”

“We understand perfectly well that you didn’t come here on purpose,” Petralka said as we walked. “But you must not come near this place, even accidentally. No good will come of it.”

“What’s in that room, exactly?”

From Petralka’s tone, it didn’t sound like a treasure chamber. I knew it would be better just to let the subject drop, but I couldn’t resist my curiosity.

Petralka thought silently for a moment, probably trying to decide whether she should tell me. “Er, if you can’t say, that’s all right...”

“No, we do not mind if you know, Shinichi.” She nodded back over her shoulder at me—no, not at me, but at the door behind me. “That is a storeroom.”

“So it *is* a treasure chamber?! Is it one of those rooms heaped with gold and jewels and stuff?!”

“No, it isn’t,” Petralka said, coldly interrupting my ridiculous flight of fantasy. “That room holds something very, very dangerous.”

“Very dangerous...”

“We believe it came up in conversation recently. Imarufe Bisurupeguze, such as the Assembly of Patriots had.”

“Th-That’s where it is?”

You know, I did remember somebody saying they had one of those here at the castle. So that was where they kept it.

“But didn’t you say it was in the basement or something?”

“Strictly speaking, beyond that door is a staircase that leads down to the

storage room. Of course, it's so closely guarded that in principle it should not be possible to steal it. But if you wish to avoid undue suspicion, you would do best to keep your distance."

"R-Right..."

It sounded like it was on par with the armory of a military base, or the room where they kept seized enemy weapons. Who could blame them for being suspicious of unauthorized personnel who got too close? An unwary visitor might even find themselves caught in some trap meant to stop any burglars.

"It is quite lucky that we happened to be passing by at the right moment."

"You're telling me... And I really appreciate it, by the way."

If Petralka hadn't showed up, that might have turned into quite the little incident.

"Regardless, Shinichi, how did you come to be so lost?"

"Oh, uh—I went to do my business. I was trying to get back to the room we were using, and couldn't find the way."

"Mm," Petralka said, still holding my hand—all I could see was the back of her head, but I could hear the grim smile in her voice. "That room is in the opposite direction from here."

"Oh..."

So I had gotten completely turned around. I decided I had better resolve to stop just walking when I got lost.

"Hey, Petralka, I get it, I'll stay clear of that room, so stop—stop pulling..."

Petralka was silent. She never loosened her grip; in fact, she squeezed tighter and picked up her pace.

Finally she said, "Ye gods! Shinichi, you are the most oblivious..."

"Huh?"

"The moment we are not constantly at your side, you become lost!"

Er, okay, so yes, I did lose my way in the underground workshop, too. But to hear it put like that—it made me sound like some kind of child, and it was kind of embarrassing. Actually, although I still couldn't see Petralka's expression, I got the sense she almost sounded like she was... enjoying this? Happy about it? Maybe I was just imagining things.

Whatever the case, it didn't look like she was going to be letting go of

my hand anytime soon.

"And how are things?" she asked.

"Wha?"

"We will need more than 'wha.' We mean Lauron. She seems to be quite capable."

I belatedly caught on that Petralka was changing the subject. It looked like she was done with whatever had called her away, and she was going to take me back to the practice room. Which I was sure grateful for, but—

"Ahh..."

I didn't quite know how to answer her question.

Yeah, Lauron wasn't bad. Not bad at all.

But... Just think about...

I pictured Lauron's crying face. If anyone was at fault here, it was probably me for misjudging her personality and abilities.

There was no question of her immense talent, but she was imitating, rather than emulating a model as we had hoped. And she did it by feel, not logic, so that even she wasn't sure of the difference. Maybe that was why she kept wondering what was wrong with her, why she felt we were attacking her.

As long as she had Petralka there to imitate, she could copy everything perfectly. But she couldn't do more than that. That meant to have the doll be really convincing, Petralka would have to be nearby at all times—which would defeat the point of a double.

What to do, what to do?

"Shinichi?" Petralka was perplexed by my silence. At the same moment she spoke, though, she stopped moving.

I looked—and saw a familiar door in front of us. Our training room. I could just catch Hikaru-san's voice from inside.

Phew! We'd made it back.

As I was breathing this internal sigh of relief, though, I saw Petralka glance at our hands. She was still holding mine. There was a beat before she let me go. It felt almost like she was hesitating—regretful? No, I had to be overthinking it.

As Petralka opened the door, she called out, "We are back. How are things g—"

"All I'm *asking*," a voice exclaimed—at first I wondered whose, but

then I realized it was Hikaru-san's—"is why you can't do it!"

Hikaru-san was standing in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips, shouting at Lauron. His voice contained a frustration I'd never heard from the seemingly unflappable young man.

Uh.....oh.

"Surely you could do it if you'd just *think* about it a little bit, right?!"

"Okay, Hikaru-kun, calm down..."

"You're, uh, scaring Lauron-san..."

"Waaaaahh!"

"Lauron, Lauron, Hikaru-sensei isn't really yelling at *you*, you know—"

Hikaru-san was shouting, Minori-san and Myusel were trying to calm him down, Lauron was a teary mess, and while Romilda tried to comfort her, all Loek could do was stand there and watch the whole thing in shock.

Damn.

I had hoped that while I was using the toilet, everyone would just take a collective deep breath, get their heads about them—but it turned out to be exactly the opposite.

I gave a very long, very deep sigh.

Petralka turned to me, her eyes wide. It must have been a pretty surprising thing to walk in on. "What in the world is happening here...?"

Well, uh, Your Majesty, it's pretty much what it looks like...

Man, I hate to think about where we go from here.

For the moment, I just looked at Petralka and shook my head in surrender—then I waded in between Hikaru-san and Lauron to see if I could patch things up.

Chapter Three: Her Own Rules?

It was another average day, when about ten students came up to me after lessons were over.

“Shinichi-sensei!”

The group looked to be roughly half boys and half girls... but all dwarves.

“Y-Yeah, what’s up?”

This wasn’t the first time I’d been surrounded by students, but it was unusual for them all to be dwarves. Especially dwarves all looking at me with a hopeful gleam in their eyes.

I knew they were after something, but this felt a little different from the times when they were after some new manga or anime. I blinked a few times. Then the students started peppering me with questions.

“How’s Lauron doing?”

“Is she killing it?”

Only then did I understand why the crowd was all dwarves.

“Lauron? Wait, you guys know?”

Lauron wasn’t a student at the school, and on top of that, her work was supposed to be top-secret—had Romilda blabbed about it? I didn’t see her among the dwarves packed in around me.

I took a second look, and discovered Romilda standing a short distance away, giving me an apologetic shrug.

Ahh...

“Romilda said it was top-secret, and she wouldn’t tell us anything about it,” one of the students said, pouting. It was one of the boys, by the way, so he looked like an old man. Have you ever seen a bearded old guy pout? It’s both funny and kind of surreal. But never mind that.

“So none of you know what Lauron is actually doing?”

“No idea.”

“But we heard she was picked for something very important!”

“Okay, I see.”

Apparently, Romilda had managed to keep the details to herself. It was understandable: craftsmen from her own father's workshop had been summoned to be part of a project that might go so far as to influence the nation's diplomacy, so it was only natural that she might want to brag about it a little. And Lauron's own family and acquaintances would no doubt notice that she was being called to the castle on an almost daily basis. I guess I should've expected people to find out that much. If anything, I could be grateful that Romilda had held back about the most important parts of the operation.

"We know Lauron, so we know she must be working hard," one girl said.

"Yeah, maybe too hard," another added. "I hope she isn't hurting herself."

The dwarf boys (it still felt kind of funny to call them that) all had similar expressions on their faces, all clearly concerned about Lauron. Some of this might have sprung from the simple fact that one of their own had been given an important task that could benefit the social standing of every dwarf. But I sensed that it was more than that.

The fact that they were asking whether she had overworked herself was proof enough.

"So how *is* she doing, Sensei?" Concern and curiosity mixed in the students' questions. I could have simply shut them down in the name of security, but...

"Well... hmm." I smiled awkwardly. "She's working hard, that's for sure. Sorry, I can't share any details with you, but I can tell you she's doing a job that only she can do. It's not easy."

"Huh..." The students all looked at each other, confused.

I really wanted to be able to say more, to reassure the kids who were worried about Lauron. But confidentiality was confidentiality, even for the guy who had come up with the plan. I couldn't go telling everyone about what was happening. That would be bad for Petralka, among other people.

"I know you're all worried," I said. "Trust me, I'm being careful not to overwork her."

"Okay!" The dwarf girls finally smiled.

...Anyway.

It had been a full ten days since Lauron had started her “training.” The situation, though, was the same as ever. She was completely capable of making the doll act like a living human being. She could make it appear exactly like Petralka. But without Petralka herself there to provide a model, Lauron suddenly became unable to make the doll work. And maybe the way Hikaru-san had upbraided her had left her with some kind of trauma, because when she did try to make herself work the puppet with no one to imitate, its movements would get less and less precise, until at last she couldn’t move it at all and she burst into tears again.

Things couldn’t go on like this, and I had come up with a number of ideas to break the impasse.

For example, I thought about how Petralka was the empress; in other words, a member of the royal family. That meant that beyond simply impersonating Petralka herself, the puppet would have to be able to *act* like a noble well enough to deceive anyone watching—so I considered starting with upper-class manners.

To that end, I had Prime Minister Zahar make a list of the bare minimum someone would have to know to abide by good noble manners, and resolved to teach them to Lauron.

She was able to memorize every single one, and with startling speed. She learned them so accurately that if I were to read off Zahar’s list and get something wrong, she could immediately correct me.

But... that was it. She wasn’t actually able to put them to use.

Is this, like... hard-headedness? Or what?

I found myself thinking of a certain type of computer game. It’s a genre where you program instructions into a robot and then make it fight. Players don’t control the robots directly, but instead make a sort of flowchart that says, “If this happens, do this,” so that the robot can respond to varying situations. That’s what makes those games interesting, but of course, if your program has any holes in it, the robot might get stuck unable to move, or go around and around in circles, or come up with some other unhelpful thing to do.

There's an inflexibility that runs through those games: you have to give detailed instructions for the robot to work. Very careful, very precise, so that it can replicate movements. Like a machine.

If you just said, "Do whatever," it might say "I don't understand" or "I can't," and start crying.

And that led me to...

"...sniff... Ohh... Waaah..."

Lauron's weeping echoed through the room once again. Faced with her sitting in the middle of the room and wailing, I felt like I was somehow bullying her. Heck, from her perspective, maybe I was.

What to do?

I looked to the other two with me for help. But when I met Minori-san's eyes, she only shook her head; and Hikaru-san offered nothing but a resigned shrug. Myusel, Loek, and Romilda weren't currently involved in our training. If Lauron couldn't get the hang of working the figure, there was no point in them being here.

Silent, I swallowed what threatened to be a very, very long sigh.

Petralka wasn't here either right now, so I couldn't have Lauron imitate her. Even if she was and I did... it wouldn't help. It wouldn't get us anywhere.

"Sob..." Lauron sniffled again, tears in her eyes. Beside her was the Petralka doll, standing stone still.

Hikaru-san, chin in hand, was looking at Lauron as if he was having some sort of brainstorm.

"Hey," he said, suddenly turning to me and Minori-san. "How about we call it quits on this training for now? We're just going in circles."

"Huh? But..." I glanced at Lauron.

In fact, I had already considered simply giving up. If it really was impossible for Lauron, we could drop her and try to find someone else—but when I had made the hint of the suggestion, Lauron had only cried even louder, looking as if that would be the end of the world.

She cried because she couldn't make the doll work. But if we told her she didn't have to work the doll anymore, she cried too.

As I'd realized from the conversation at school, the other dwarves might not know what exactly was going on, but they still had high expectations for Lauron. She probably knew that perfectly well, and that was part of why

she was afraid of being let go.

But Hikaru-san said, “I don’t mean in the sense of kicking Lauron out. She’s able to recreate movements she’s seen once, no problem. So as far as routine duties like waving at people from a balcony, I think she should be fine. Later, we can have Her Majesty teach Lauron more ‘movement patterns,’ and just put them together.”

“That’s...”

Well, exactly right. From some distance away, it would be impossible to tell the two of them apart. The problem would be when she had to interact at close range with another person. But when she could just replicate specific movements, Lauron was perfect.

“At the moment, I think our problem is somewhere other than actual control of the doll,” Hikaru-san said. “So I think we should focus on that issue, rather than on her puppetry.”

Lauron fell quiet and looked at Hikaru-san, blinking.

“She can only memorize her ‘responses.’”

“Ah...” So Hikaru-san had noticed it, too.

“Shinichi-san, I’m guessing you’ve figured this out yourself.”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“It’s the same thing that gets criticized sometimes about the Japanese educational system. This idea that memorization makes you ‘smart,’ even if you don’t actually understand the content. Lauron, I think it’s safe to say, has an incredible memory.” Then Hikaru-san gave a bit of a sigh. “That’s helped her get by so far. Memorizing everything. Be it at work or whatever else, she can just imitate what other people do. But for that exact reason, she hasn’t improved, either. She can’t respond to things in her own way. She isn’t very good yet at digesting things and understanding them for herself.”

“I see...”

“She gets that it’s not the same thing as memorizing. She just doesn’t seem to understand how. A copy machine can replicate an original down to the smallest detail, but it doesn’t know anything about what the original says. You could copy a million poems from Goethe or Heine on it, and it would never be able to write a poem itself. You could print out Einstein’s whole theory of special relativity, and the copy machine could never develop a new theory from it. That’s where Lauron is at right now.”

“Yeah, I get that, but...”

That was all logical, as far as it went. But what did it mean? What were we supposed to do about it?

Hikaru-san was blunt: “Right now, we need to be focusing not on increasing the fidelity of the copies or enabling the machine to make more copies—but on teaching that copy machine to think for itself.”

He added, “Cosplay and 2D creation are both the same way.”

“Huh? How’s that?”

“A cosplayer who has no love for the character he’s cosplaying, or a creator who doesn’t love the work he’s creating, they’re going to get torn down by the fans, right? So, what is that love?”

“Well, uh...”

It came down to how well the person grasped the character or the work.

Like, if someone was cosplaying a character I loved, but the cosplayer didn’t love them, and I saw the cosplayer doing something or acting in a way that character would never do or act, it would shatter the illusion. It would make me angry, like the character was being disgraced.

Can you imagine some pure, sweet bishoujo squatting on her haunches and smoking a cigarette? Unpleasant, right? Even if it were just a cosplayer, I would probably still end up shouting at them, “My precious ●● would never do that!”

“I get it. It’s understanding by absorbing actual examples—deductive, not inductive reasoning.” This came from Minori-san.

“Remind me what that’s about, again,” I said. I was embarrassed to admit that while I knew I had heard those words before, I couldn’t remember exactly what they meant.

“Inductive reasoning is taking a set of facts—call them A, B, C, and D—and trying to determine truth by looking for the common factors,” Minori-san said. “It’s like how we’ve been showing Lauron a lot of Her Majesty doing this and that, in hopes that she’ll be able to figure out the ‘Her Majesty-ish-ness’ from there.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Deductive reasoning, on the other hand, is when you take a series of propositions and use them to find the truth. Syllogism is probably the most famous example. Like, you take the major premise ‘All humans die,” and add a more specific premise like, ‘Kanou Shinichi is a human,’ to reach the

conclusion ‘Kanou Shinichi will die.’”

“Why do I have to be the subject of your syllogism?”

“Details, details,” Minori-san said. “The point is, we can tell Lauron what to do, or say when she’s made a mistake, because we understand something about the empress, but that understanding comes from more than a collection of facts or examples. It’s because we understand Her Majesty’s personality and circumstances that we can say ‘This seems like something she would do’ or ‘There’s no way she would do that.’”

“I get it. Yeah, you’re right.”

So, say, you could have an overarching premise like “arrogant girls often shout,” combined with a more specific premise like “Petralka is arrogant,” to reach a conclusion like “Petralka often shouts.” I think that’s how it works, anyway.

Even if you had never actually seen Petralka shouting, from the fact that she was arrogant, you could predict that she would often shout.

Hikaru-san picked up the thread. “So instead of worrying about the doll itself, I think we need to start with an understanding of the ‘character’ Lauron is playing, and how she would act in a given situation. If what the doll does doesn’t match up with what Her Majesty would do, it’ll never fool anyone.”

“So you’re saying...” I looked at Lauron. “...we need to teach Lauron how to *play* Petralka—that she needs to understand her as well as we do, or better?”

“That’s the idea,” Hikaru-san said.

Getting Lauron on close terms with Petralka was all well and good, but if the problem was really about teaching her to think for herself instead of just copying, well, that sounded awfully difficult to do. Wasn’t that on par with asking her to change her personality?

“Of course—” Hikaru-san was looking at Lauron again; he sighed once more. “I’m not saying we don’t have a long road ahead...”

He couldn’t quite hide the hint of fatigue in his voice.

“You’ve worked hard today, Master.”

We were all back home, resting in the living room. Myusel had thoughtfully brought us hot tea and sweet snacks even though we hadn't asked for them.

"Thanks, Myusel..."

"Not at all."

She probably just considered this part of her job, but a little bit of kindness like this really went a long way toward taking the sting out of my exhausted heart. The treats she'd made today were a little less sweet than usual, but still plenty sweet enough, and most importantly, you could grab them in your hands and just eat them. In its own way, it showed how accurately she had read our feelings and situation.

That talent, or whatever you wanted to call it—it would be great if Lauron could pick up some of it, too.

"How is Lauron-san?" Myusel asked.

Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I looked at each other—and then we all sighed.

"S...Sorry..." Myusel said, sensing the grim atmosphere.

"Don't worry, Myusel, you don't have to apologize," I said quickly. "It's not your fault—you're just being thoughtful."

"But that girl... I really wonder if she can go on like this." This whisper came from Minori-san, who had leaned as far back in her chair as she could. "It's really incredible, the way she can control magical dolls so smoothly. I'm sure no one's better than her on that score. But..."

"Hmm..." There was nothing I could say to that; I couldn't agree or disagree.

We had settled on getting her to understand Petralka personally, but there were no promises it would go well. We had already put no small amount of time and effort and resources into this body-double project, and we would all have hated to see it all go to waste.

That suggested the need for a plan B. Like, maybe we could have several magic-users all controlling the Petralka puppet at once. A team, if you will. If they learned to work well together, maybe they could make the doll look just as realistic as Lauron did.

"I think that personality of hers is a problem, too," Hikaru-san said with another sigh. He took a sip of the tea Myusel had so kindly brought and shrugged. "I can wink at the way she's so quick to cry... But I'm not so sure

about how her magic dissipates the moment she starts crying. Maybe if we could at least get her to see a performance through to the end even when she's crying, it'd be okay. But with the magic cutting out as soon as she gets upset, I'm worried about what will happen when we really need her."

What if the doll was involved in a meeting with a foreign dignitary—and Lauron started crying in the middle of it, causing her magic to vanish?

"Yeah, that is a problem..." I frowned as I considered this worst of bad scenarios.

Was the real issue not Lauron's abilities, but her psychological makeup?

"Lauron Selioz..." I murmured, taking a bite of one of the chocolate-ish baked goods Myusel had brought.

To me the question was, *why* did Lauron cry? Why did her magic stop working when she cried? Was she that afraid of people getting angry at her because she couldn't do the job? Or was she worried about being embarrassed?

Come to think of it, Romilda had used words like "obsessive," "way serious," and "inflexible" to describe her. That had led me to picture her as someone stubborn and particular, but it was hard to reconcile that with the real Lauron and her frequent bouts of tears.

"Hrmmm..."

When it came down to it, I didn't really know that much about Lauron, the girl. If this was a problem of personality—a psychological issue—maybe it would be best to start from that perspective?

"Maybe *we* need to get closer to *Lauron*, get her to open up to us a bit..."

Our relationship so far had really been dictated by our work. "Work friends" sounds great and all, but it was really just a way of saying that your job was the only thing you had in common. Which meant it could also be a wall that prevented us from really getting close.

If by becoming real friends with her we could break through that wall, she might explain to us why she cried so much.

And then maybe, just maybe, we could find a solution.

"Shinichi-san, you..." Hikaru-san was almost muttering to himself, regarding me coldly. "...really *do* want to expand your harem, don't you?"

"Why does everyone keep accusing me of that?!" I groaned.

"What, you mean you really don't? I'm sure Romilda said you picked out Lauron specifically to add her to your collection..."

“Well, I didn’t!”

Curse that Romilda! What was I supposed to do if my reputation took a beating it never recovered from?!

...Okay.

Obviously, I understood that neither Romilda nor Hikaru-san exactly meant it. From the slightly sadistic smile on Hikaru-san’s face, I could tell that he especially wasn’t really being serious. And neither was Minori-san, who was listening to our conversation and laughing.

But there are people in life who will take every joke seriously...

“Is... Is that really true...?”

No! Myusel! It’s just a joke, don’t take it seriously! I’m begging you, don’t look so shocked!

“N-No!” I shouted. “It’s a scurrilous lie! Hikaru-san and Romilda are just joking! I’m not interested in any harem!”

...All right, maybe just a *little* interested. But even I wasn’t stupid enough to admit that right at this moment.

“It’s true,” Hikaru-san said with a smile. “Shinichi-san isn’t the type to go for just any girl willy-nilly.”

“D-Darn straight!” I nodded.

I should have known, though, that a little imp of a cross-dresser like Hikaru-san would never offer me help like that without a catch.

“Shinichi-san is very particular. He only likes loli girls.”

“Now just a—”

“He likes them so much that he’ll chant *Yes Lolita! No Touch!* in front of everyone.”

Arrrrrgh!

I mean, yes, I did do that once!

“But that was about being a gentleman... I mean, I *do* like lolis, but I don’t *only* like lolis, so...”

My protestations fell on deaf ears.

“I think the only loli you really need is the empress—but oh, I see. Your harem is your harem, and you want it to be all lolis, don’t you? Is it the smooth, undeveloped—”

“I *told* you, it’s not true!!” I wailed, keenly aware of Myusel watching me. “Look, if you say something like that in front of Petralka, I’m gonna be executed, okay?!”

And so the day drew to a close with no definitive solution to our problems.

I got a night's sleep, but unfortunately, that didn't mean I was going to just conveniently have a great idea in the meantime. I headed to school still sighing.

Should I start by changing the relationship between us and Lauron? Get to know her and then think of the best way to help her?

"But where would I even start...?"

It was break time in the classroom. I looked around and saw students playing with action figures. It was just like I'd seen before. Lately, several of the students—mostly dwarves—had started playing with the figures during down time. Apparently they were certifiably popular.

It wasn't all fighting. Some of them were using the cameras on their 3Tses to record the figures moving around to make what amounted to short films. If this world had had video-sharing sites, I'll bet we would have seen plenty of uploads of figures having dance battles.

I looked out listlessly over the scene. Compared to Lauron's work, the figures were jerky and awkward in the hands of the students. And yet—they seemed somehow more *alive* than when Lauron was moving the doll. I guess you could chalk it up to a difference in understanding—or maybe it had to do with the puppeteer's motivation.

Like, say you were working an anime-based figure. You wouldn't just replicate what the character does in the show; you would naturally do other things, too. But those motions would seem to "fit" that character. And they would fit because you understood the character.

Makes sense, right?

So how did the other kids achieve that understanding?

They didn't have to be super accurate, or very detailed. *Likeness* wasn't about absolute accuracy.

Didn't my dad say something like that once...?

Likeness. What you might call believability, in a story. My dad, the light novel author, told me that the exact replication of reality wasn't the highest

form of believability. Sometimes deliberately mixing in a little lie actually made things more plausible.

And why would you include a lie?

You want to evoke likeness because you want readers to enjoy the work. Likeness makes the whole thing *feel* right to your audience. In other words...

Just doing what you're told. Sticking to what's been decided. Mechanically... machines actually do the most precise job of all. A copy machine. But the machine doesn't understand. Machines—don't have goals.

They don't have motivation.

The desire to enjoy, and to allow others to enjoy. That was the motivation behind how the students moved the action figures. Pure and simple.

They worked backwards from the goal of enjoyment to find the best way to achieve it.

So what about Lauron?

"Does it have to do with... her sense of the goal?"

"Bam!"

I was interrupted by a student shouting. I looked in their direction and saw Romilda leading a whole gaggle of dwarves, all surrounding a desk where they were playing with action figures.

Suddenly curious, I watched them more closely. A figure of a pink-haired girl was rolling around on the desk as if the movement were no big thing. Beside her was a golden-haired girl holding a gun. And standing just in front of the gun was a figure of a girl with black hair. It looked like they were acting out some kind of battle.

"We have no choice but to die!"

I recognized the line one of the students was reciting.

"...*Rental ☆Madoka*, huh?"

The dwarves were re-creating a scene from the show. As I recalled, next, the pink-haired girl—the protagonist, Madoka—would shoot the golden-haired girl, and that would be the end of the scene.

"Sensei—" said one of the students, looking up from the captivating play.

"I know this scene. It's the one where Manami-san goes crazy because the temp agency she works for is just too evil, right?"

A famous moment.

"Yeah, exactly! That's Sensei for you!" The students started to laugh.

"It looks like you've really got it down," I said.

"We're not as good as Lauron, though," Romilda said, a little embarrassed.

The figure continued to shamble around on the desktop while she spoke. I watched it for a moment, then said, "Actually, I'd like to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"Is Lauron a... crybaby?"

Romilda and the other dwarves looked at each other blankly. The figures also cocked their heads delicately.

"I don't really think so," Romilda said, shaking her head. "She's serious. You know, the kind who always shows up ten minutes early to everything. But I guess she does have a stubborn streak. Like, if you tell her not to move, she literally won't move a muscle no matter what happens. And she gets real upset if people don't follow the rules. In the worst case, she might even start crying."

"Crying..." I said under my voice. I could feel an idea tugging at me.

Such-and-such has to be done. She can't do it. Hence, crying.

In other words...

"Remember how she got angry the other day?" one of the students said.

"What happened, again?"

"I think she said the Faldra parts weren't quite lined up on the shelf or something."

"And then when she tried to fix it, the boss shouted that if she had time to sweat details like that, she should find something more productive to do! Right?"

All the students seemed amused by the recollection. Apparently, they had accepted Lauron's hard-headedness as just part of who she was; they didn't seem to be criticizing her for it.

"There was another time—it was a while ago now—when..." Romilda was just about to launch into another funny anecdote, but then she stopped in the middle of her sentence. "Huh...?" She looked at the desk, blinking.

"What's up?" I said, following her troubled gaze—and then I saw it.

The action figures that had been jumping around with such vigor just a

few minutes ago lay lifelessly on the desk.

Romilda reached out to one of them and intoned a spell again. But the character showed no sign of moving.

"What?" She furrowed her brow and tilted her head. I glanced around the room and saw that it was the same with all the figures the students had been playing with, and everyone else looked just as confused as Romilda.

"There, finally got it." After a few moments of repeating her spell, Romilda's figure slowly came back to life. She looked very relieved.

"Gosh, what was that all about?" I wondered aloud. The figures had been moving so readily a few minutes ago—why would they suddenly just stop? And not just for Romilda, either—all the figures in the classroom.

"Recently... *yawn*... this has been happening a lot," Romilda said, trying to suppress a yawn between words. "We suddenly can't use magic. It always comes back after a minute, but..."

The other students nodded in agreement. Several of them were also yawning.

What the heck was going on here? Why was everyone so tired all of a sudden?

And of course, why had the figures stopped moving—the magic stopped working?

"Oh yeah..." I felt like someone had mentioned something about temporary magic stoppages not long ago. Who was it? Hikaru-san, I thought.

What was going on? I thought I could feel my heart beating a little faster in my chest. Maybe I was imagining it.

Then I suddenly remembered what Hikaru-san had said the other day.

"If this were a light novel or a manga or something, this is about where we would get the twist—the thing that turns everything else upside down."

"Nah, couldn't be... Right?" I smiled grimly, but even I thought I sounded like I was trying to convince myself.

The next day—school was out, and we were in our usual room at Eldant Castle.

We were waiting for Lauron. In attendance were myself, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, Myusel, and the Petralka puppet. We had been informed ahead of time that Petralka herself might or might not be able to make it due to the demands of official business. We were doing Lauron's training here in the castle specifically because Petralka had hoped to participate as much as possible, but official duties and urgent matters seemed to crop up more and more, and she was frequently absent.

Of course, if this body-double thing works out, maybe she won't have to worry about all that so much, I told myself for the umpteenth time.

Incidentally, Myusel was there in Petralka's place—if the empress herself couldn't be present to model, we wanted everyone we could get who knew her well.

"This is kind of strange," I said suddenly. "Lauron usually beats us here."

"What time is it now?" Hikaru-san asked absently, leaning against the wall and looking out one of the windows.

I consulted the G-SH*CK on my wrist. "My watch shows three," I said. "To be more precise, two minutes till."

That was to say, it was almost three o'clock in Japan, but I wasn't sure exactly what time it was here in Eldant. Frankly, I still wasn't entirely clear on how to read their clocks. I had the general feeling that a day was broadly split into twenty-four hours, but I lacked a fine sense for the smaller divisions. I always felt like maybe I was a few minutes early or late. But as I didn't really have a schedule to keep at the moment, I hadn't worried too much about it. I knew the JSDF garrison conducted operations at specific times, so maybe they had a better grasp of it.

"Hey," I said, thinking back to my conversation in the classroom. "Romilda said something about Lauron always showing up ten minutes early to everything."

"She's a diligent one, that girl," Minori-san said with a wry smile.

"I think so too," Myusel chimed in. "She seems fastidious and good person."

Maybe this was her way of defending Lauron. Ahh, Myusel. What a sweetie.

“But if she’s as scrupulous as all that, why does she always end up crying and letting her magic drop?”

“Hikaru-san...” He sounded as critical as ever, and I couldn’t do anything but smile darkly about it.

As a cosplayer, Hikaru-san knew what it meant to imitate someone, to play a part, so he knew what he was talking about. He was pretty good at it, too—so it seemed natural to him, and apparently it bothered him more than the rest of us that Lauron couldn’t seem to do it. It wasn’t really a personal beef with her—I thought.

“Well, everyone has different talents.”

“Sure, but...”

And so on.

Thus we talked as we waited for Lauron, until suddenly, the door flew open so fast it practically jumped off its hinges. Lauron flew in, breathing so hard her shoulders were heaving. She looked around at us. Maybe she was upset about having arrived after we did—her brow was furrowed, and she looked like she might burst into tears right then and there.

“Cool, you’re here. Let’s get started, shall we?” I spoke as nonchalantly as I could, trying to communicate that it didn’t bother me and everything was fine. I stole a glance at my watch: precisely three o’clock. She was bang on time. It wouldn’t have crossed our minds to criticize her about it. And yet...

“L... Lauron?” Minori-san said. Her voice sounded higher than usual, uncommonly worried. I looked up from my watch to see Lauron’s expression: she hadn’t started crying, but her face was screwed up like a huge torrent of emotion was about to come rushing out. She hadn’t even closed the door.

“What? What?”

“What’s wrong...?”

“Lauron-san...?”

I was taken aback by the sudden turn and couldn’t quite muster a response, but Minori-san and Myusel collected themselves and went over to her. Minori-san pushed the door shut and looked comfortingly into Lauron’s eyes.

“...sniff...”

“Are you feeling bad?” Minori-san asked, sounding concerned, but

Lauron shook her head and didn't answer right away.

A second later, though, among half-voiced sniffles, she whispered to herself, "Wh... What am I going to do...? I didn't... I couldn't get here on time..."

"...Huh?"

"I couldn't... be on time...!"

"I-It's okay, really. Look, you're perfectly punctual." I rushed to show Lauron my watch. Er, but I guess she couldn't read the watch anyway, so there was no point.

Lauron, though, just kept shaking her head, not looking up.

Huh? What the heck was going on here?!

"I couldn't get here ten minutes early..."

"Guh?"

My eyes went wide. So what? Did Lauron consider arriving "on time" to mean being ten minutes early?

Wasn't that just a little... weird? Normally, someone who's described as "always ten minutes early" is someone who isn't late, who arrives with a little leeway. I don't think it *literally* means being ten minutes ahead of schedule all the time.

"Seriously, you're okay—you're on time! Nobody's mad at you," I said, trying to make Lauron feel better even though I didn't fully comprehend what was going on. "Anyway, this is the first time you've ever been less than ten minutes early. If it bothers you that much, just be more careful next time."

"Next time? I can't..."

"Sorry...?"

"There is no next time! I *have* to be early. I absolutely have to follow the rule... absolutely must..."

She just kept repeating *absolutely must* over and over. It was kind of intimidating, actually.

What was with this yandere? Okay, so she was more *yan* than *dere*.

In any event, we weren't going to be getting any training done like this. I had to sit Lauron in the chair and get her to calm down a little first.

Maybe aware that he was a source of pressure for Lauron, Hikaru-san had backed off and was standing near the wall. Myusel had poured some water into a cup from a carafe she had brought with us, and offered it to the

dwarf while Minori-san and I knelt by Lauron's side.

"No one's angry at you," I said as gently as I could, but Lauron just shook her head weakly. She made no move to take the cup Myusel offered her.

Was it really that huge a deal to her that she hadn't arrived ten minutes early? That she hadn't been able to observe her personal rules? I know I joke about yanderes or whatever, but things were getting weird here.

"It's all right."

"No, it's not... If I don't keep the rules...'ll die..."

"What? *Die*?!" I exclaimed. "How do you mean, die? Who's going to die?"

"The bird..." Lauron sniffled.

"The bird...?" Her answer didn't make a lot of sense to me. I looked at Minori-san for help, but she shook her head, looking as perplexed as I was.

"Bird... You mean, like..." In my mind, I tried to think of something that connected Lauron and birds. "Oh, uh, you mean like the one in the underground workshop? I guess we used to use those in my world, too. People would take them down into mines to detect dangerous gases. We called them canaries."

Lauron didn't say anything.

"Did... Did one of those birds die down in the workshop, maybe?"

After a long moment, she replied, "No, that's not what happened."

"Oh, uh, oh. Okay."

But if that was the case, then what in the world did birds have to do with anything?

Lauron kept whuffling, but she rubbed at her eyes. "There was one... in the past. When I was still small."

"Er, one what? One who?"

"A friend... A friend and I were... taking care of a bird..."

"Oh... Sure."

"We took turns feeding it, and I... one day, I... forgot..." Putting it into words seemed to make the memory clearer for her. Lauron let out a strangled sob. "I thought it would be fine for one day... But... the next day, the bird was dead..."

Ahh... So that was the story. This stuff about the bird dying had to do with an episode from her past. I guess I *had* heard something about small

birds being especially susceptible to starvation.

"That made my friend mad... They said they never wanted to see me again... And the boss got really angry, too... That's why I have to—have to keep my promises... Absolutely..."

For the dwarves who worked in those underground worksites, birds were more than pets; they were also a warning system for the whole workshop. A lifeline, if you will. So letting one die through your own negligence would understandably make not just your friends, but also the headman of the workshop, pretty upset at you.

But still...

"I just feel so sick if I don't..."

Ahh... That traumatic experience, having that bird die because she didn't do what she had said she would, led her to feel ill at ease if she didn't follow the rules.

If there was a rule, and you followed it, then you were safe. That seemed to be her line of thinking. And if there wasn't a rule, then you made one up, and obeyed it completely. Once she had decided she would be ten minutes early to things, she felt compelled to do it all the time, or she fell into a panic.

She wasn't thinking about the *why* of the rules anymore. The rules had become a way for her to forget her anxieties.

"Huh..." I sighed.

If I had to guess, I would say the reason she started to cry every time she had trouble with the doll was motivated by the same thing. Fulfilling her duty as the controller of Petralka's body double had become a sort of "rule" for her. But she was having trouble keeping it. She was being told she wasn't doing well enough. That she *couldn't* follow the rules. It would be enough to make her physically ill...

A machine, huh?

I guess Lauron crying was sort of like when a machine spits out some weird does-not-compute noise.

I also felt, though, that we had finally connected with something within her. We knew now that the problem had to do with a trauma in her past. But was that something we could do anything about?

"I feel sick..."

While the rest of us stood there at a loss, Lauron started crying again.

In the end, we decided not to do any practice that day, but just sent Lauron home. She was upset by the idea of going home before the scheduled time, but by the same token, when that time rolled around, she seemed to collect herself a little, and obediently left.

Talk about a stickler for the details—or I guess, more to the point, she was unhappy if she didn't stick to the framework she'd established.

This was going to be a tough one.

"We are coming in." The door was already opening when we heard the familiar, loli voice. Then, however, Petralka pursed her lips and said, "Hrm. It seems we are too late."

She closed the door and came walking over to me, looking me in the face. "How did Lauron seem to you today? Did it go well?"

"About that..." I was sort of lost for words. I couldn't help glancing away from her—and my eyes met Minori-san's. In my peripheral vision, I saw Petralka follow my glance, looking at Minori-san, too. But there was nothing she could say, and we both just shook our heads ambiguously. Myusel and Hikaru-san were no more help.

"Is that so..." Petralka slumped her shoulders, seeming to catch the drift of our reactions.

"And to think, this puppet is such an amazing piece of work," Hikaru-san sighed from where he was leaning against the wall beside the doll.

"Regardless... We suppose that even simply having it stand at attention has a certain value," Petralka said, as if to assuage our worries.

"But... But that won't make your burden any lighter, Petralka," I said.

"Hm? Our burden? Was it not our safety you were concerned for?" Petralka looked genuinely perplexed.

Oh... I guess I had just thought about this part, never really talked about it.

"I thought... I thought maybe the double could take on some of your public duties, even just a few of them. I mean, I remember you talking about how we had less time than before to be together and everything."

"We... We did indeed say that."

"And I thought that if we could get the doll to do more than just stand

there, if we could get it to move and talk so believably that someone in the same room wouldn't be able to tell you apart... If we could do that, maybe it could take just a little bit of the work off your hands, Petralka."

"Shinichi..." Petralka looked at me, blinking. Her face was red and her hands seemed to be shaking, but I wasn't sure why. I, uh, didn't think I had done anything to provoke the imperial wrath...

But anyway, forget about my private quaking and cowering. "In any event," I said, "if it doesn't look like it's going to work out, I think it might be a good idea to find someone besides Lauron. We would still have her continue her special training, of course. But for body-double duties alone, it would be easy enough to have a tag team switch off."

"Hrmm..." Petralka looked at the floor and shook her head as if to clear something away, then she looked up at me once again. "Has it indeed been such a trial...?"

"Er, it looks like Lauron has these internal rules that she's trapped by. She can't do anything that doesn't follow them."

"What do you mean by that?" Petralka asked.

"I mean she's got this sort of ideal inside her head, like, 'This is what I have to do.' If she isn't able to live up to that ideal, even if it isn't her fault, it makes her feel sick."

"Is that so..." Petralka nodded thoughtfully, putting a finger to her chin. "We also recall something of the sort."

"Uh, you do?" I was a little startled by that.

"The self we wished to be, and the self we were—there was a time when we were troubled by the difference between the two."

"Wow..."

I guess it shouldn't have surprised me to realize that being the empress of a major nation comes with a lot of expectations. And not just from the people you personally know. People you've never met, maybe thousands or tens of thousands of them, expect a whole range of different things from you.

I have to think a normal person just... wouldn't understand what that sort of pressure was like. To have this ideal image of an empress that you had to take on... It could break you.

"But I don't know what we're supposed to do about it..." I sighed quietly.

Petralka, her brow furrowed, said, “Do you of all people ask this?” She sounded sort of exasperated.

“Huh...?”

“Is this not what you’re best at?”

I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Thanks to you, we...” She stopped in the middle of her sentence, as if rethinking things, then she shut those sweet little lips and looked away from me. “Forget it!”

“Huh? Wh-What? Why are you angry?”

“We are not angry!” Petralka snapped, crossing her arms and looking past me.

Uh... You look pretty angry to me, Your Majesty.

What the heck had I done this time...? I stood there, flummoxed by the miffed monarch, but then someone spoke up.

“Your Majesty...” It was—it was Myusel. “Shinichi-sama is a very humble man, you see...”

“Er?” I said dumbly, taken aback by this description.

Humble? What? Was she talking about me? And if so, what exactly was she saying?

“We insist this goes beyond humility. This is simple density,” Petralka replied. “We must assume he is much the same at your mansion. Myusel, surely you must be fatigued.”

“Oh, no, not at all...” she protested, but with a wry smile that said *Well, y’know...*

I did *not* understand this conversation. Was this what they call *girl talk*?! (Answer: no.)

I stood there, apparently the only one in the room completely mystified by this, when—

“Come to think of it,” Petralka said, seemingly mollified for the moment by her chat with Myusel. She looked at me again. “Has there been anything unusual to do with magic today?”

“Unusual?” I looked from Minori-san to Hikaru-san, and then to Myusel. Each of them looked back at me in turn, puzzled. Nobody seemed to know what she was talking about. “Nothing in particular, I think...”

I sure didn’t have any idea. “Did something happen?”

“Lately, the sprites have been in an unusual state,” Petralka said, crossing her arms, “and it is influencing magic. We’ve been busy looking into the matter.” She heaved a long sigh.

Okay. These sprites. What I was told was that when there’s a high enough density of magical power for any reason, the magic kind of clumps up and becomes these entities that behave like living things. In that sense,

sprites were a sort of natural phenomenon, and in extreme terms, sprites and magical power were fundamentally the same thing.

And just as there was magic everywhere in this alternate world, so you could find sprites anywhere you went. Thus magic had proliferated as one of the basic technologies of this world, and was part of everyone's daily life. The magical rings we all wore were an obvious example, and the wind mages keeping the castle's toilets bearable were another.

But lately, it seemed, the number of sprites or the density of magic had become noticeably unbalanced. I had been aware that there were slight variations, of course, but they had never been enough to cause a problem. Lately, though, there had been times when people were spontaneously unable to use magic. Just small-scale incidents, but incidents nevertheless.

"You know..." I thought back to what had happened in the classroom. The way all the dwarves' figures had stopped moving. With no warning, all the magic had suddenly become unusable.

Prompted by my look, Petralka asked, "Have you thought of something?"

"I don't know the reason, exactly, but in the classroom the magic suddenly stopped working. It came back right away, though..."

"Is that so..." Petralka murmured.

"Is the phenomenon expected to get worse over time?" Minori-san asked.

Petralka shook her head. "No one knows. It may worsen, it may not. Such thing truly has never happened before."

"If it looks like it may turn into a large-scale disaster, please tell us right away," Minori-san said. "Disaster relief is the bread and butter of the JSDF. We might not be able to prevent the problem itself, but since we don't rely on magic, I'll bet we could do a lot to help."

Ahh, that's my JSDF.

"Very well. Your offer is appreciated." Petralka nodded with all the gravity of an empress. "If any further details are discovered, we will make sure you are informed."

When I checked my phone, it was already after ten o'clock at night.

In this place where so very few people had electricity, most of the world was engulfed in darkness—that is to say, it was as good as the middle of the night. It was all the darker tonight, when the sky was cloudy and you couldn't see the moon.

In my room, I always kept an oil lamp, as well as a sprite light—sprites magically sealed into a glass ball—to help hold the darkness outside the window at bay.

"Hmmm..."

I reached a stopping point and sat back from my computer. I did some shoulder circles to loosen them up.

With Lauron's "education" added to my duties, I'd found myself burning the midnight oil like this a lot recently. I often wouldn't get to bed until the next day, sometimes two or three o'clock. Kind of a depressing thought, considering that I typically woke up around six a.m.

I was just suppressing a yawn when—

"Master?" There was a knock at the door. "I brought tea."

"Myusel? It's open—come on in."

"Thank you." She opened the door and entered the room.

Not just her, though. Behind Myusel and the tea cart, another face peeked in: Elvia.

That was unusual. Notwithstanding the times she got sucked into drawing, Elvia was usually the early-to-bed, early-to-rise type. By ten o'clock, she tended to be so soundly asleep that you could have jumped up and down right next to her and not woken her up. That didn't strike me as making her great spy material, but I guess that point was already settled, so never mind.

"Eh heh heh. Hullo..." Elvia looked a little embarrassed as she slipped into my room.

"We tried baking radosen for a snack tonight," Myusel said, pointing to something on the lower level of the cart. There was a plate with two slices of something very white and very flat, blackened a little here and there. Some kind of bread?

"Radosen?" I asked.

"It's a kind of bread they like to eat in Bahairam, Elvia-san says. She taught me about it."

“She did?” I glanced in her direction, and the Bahairamanian beast girl gave another shy chuckle. *Aw, man, wicked cute!*

No, not the time for that. I hadn’t thought Elvia did a lot of cooking. Maybe she hadn’t taught Myusel the recipe, but just told her that this stuff existed.

“She says they cook it on celebratory occasions, and that it gives you energy. Normally you cook it in a purpose-built oven, but of course we didn’t have one, so you could call this ‘Eldant style.’” Myusel smiled a little.

“Neat... So it’s kind of a ‘special event’ food?” I tore off a piece and put it in my mouth. Bread is bread, sure, but this had a faint sweetness. Not like it had been dusted with sugar or anything; it tasted like the sweetness came from the ingredients. It was simple, but delicious.

Beside the bread was another dish with some kind of paste on it, which it looked like you were supposed to add to the bread when you were ready for a little more flavor. It reminded me somehow of Asian homestyle cooking—and it definitely felt like Bahairam.

“You looked so tired, Shinichi-sama, that even Elvia-san started to worry about you...”

“Oh, uh, I just—” Elvia waved her hands anxiously. “I d-don’t want to be a buttinski, but you look kind of like when Big Sis Ama is getting too serious about something, and... I thought maybe you had some really tough work to deal with, so, I, uh...”

“Oh...” I scratched my cheek apologetically. In light of the fact that she was technically a spy for an enemy nation, we hadn’t told Elvia about the body-double project, so she didn’t have any idea why I was running myself ragged. Maybe she was a little concerned that I was so obviously busy and she was the only one who seemed to be left out of the loop.

“I’m sorry, Elvia. We aren’t trying to ostracize you or something.”

“N-No, don’t worry,” she said, shaking her head quickly. “I just—Shinichi-sama, I really—y’know...” And then, apparently too embarrassed to go on, Elvia looked at the ground.

Oooh, a fresh new side of her...!

The gap between this, and that moon-thing—the way she could shove me down, panting all over me, once a month—who wouldn’t get moe about that?! Wait—could this be deliberate? Could that be what she was after?

Was this calculated—intentional—on purpose?! Ooh, Elvia, you fiend!

.....Okay, so Elvia was the one person I didn't think would ever actually pull something like that. Her whole existence felt calculated to make me moe, but she seemed so totally oblivious to it that it would never have occurred to her to take advantage of it. Granted, that's part of why she was so cute.

Okay, getting back on track...

"Elvia-san is worried about your health, too, Shinichi-sama," Myusel said, trying to rescue the conversation.

"Elvia... *too*?"

"Yes. Her too," Myusel said. "Of course, Her Majesty is as well." She looked completely—well, *confident* would be the wrong word. She looked like this was all obvious. Her tone said, *"You know that, don't you?"*

"Come to think of it," I said slowly, "this afternoon, Petralka got angry, and you said something about modesty or humility or whatever. What was that all about?"

"What? Oh... Yes, I'm sorry." Myusel shrugged a little as she spoke. "I didn't mean to be forward..."

"Don't worry, you weren't."

Myusel and Petralka both seemed to be on the same page about something, and I felt left out. And because they were obviously talking about me, it was that much more galling not to know what they were talking about.

"Shinichi-sama, you... I think perhaps you don't notice it yourself, but... you have the power to change the people you come into contact with."

".....Huh?"

Power? What?

Wait... maybe, without me realizing it, some incredible ability had awoken within me?!

The name of my power? Auto-changer! Able to change people just by coming into contact with them!

...Er, okay, so that probably wasn't what she meant.

"Me, Her Majesty, Elvia-san..." Myusel glanced to the side when she said that last name. Elvia, for her part, was looking at us questioningly, like she didn't quite follow the conversation. "And Brooke-san, Cerise-san, and... probably everyone in your classroom. It's very gradual, but thanks to

you, all of us have changed somehow. Through the classes at school. Through your ‘sokker’ tournament. By working on your moo-vee. Even through what happened with Bahairam. Shinichi-sama, everyone around you—”

“Nononononono.” I shook my head. “That’s not some power of mine, it’s...”

Just what happens.

So maybe it was true that the people around me were gradually changing. Myusel was just a little less flustered than before when little things went wrong, and she and Petralka had become friends of a kind. The people who knew me maybe looked down on demi-humans and half-elves a little less. Elvia was more cheerful than when I’d first met her, a little less care-worn.

But all of that... all of that was ultimately because the environment around those people had changed. Take Petralka, for example. She was closer to Myusel because the maid had saved her life—not because of anything I’d personally done. In stronger terms, the people around me changed as a way of adapting to their new environment.

And the changes in that environment? I wasn’t the one who caused them. It was really the importation of various kinds of otaku culture through Amutech. Really, just about anyone could have been the company’s general manager—even Hikaru-san—and there’s a good chance the same things would have happened.

“None of that’s because of some power I have,” I said. “It just so happens that some things happened around me that caused you all to change for yourselves...”

“Yes,” Myusel nodded, looking extremely happy for some reason. Actually... considering how rarely she let herself smile like that, should I have taken it to be her version of a triumphant smirk? “Shinichi-sama, you always say things like that.”

“What...?”

“You never take credit for anything you’ve done.”

“Anything... I’ve done? Wait, I get it.” The lightbulb finally went on about this humility business.

Petralka and Myusel both felt they had changed. And evidently, they were kind enough to chalk that change up to me. That was where all this talk of special powers was coming from.

“Her Majesty must believe that if anyone can help Lauron-san change for the better, it would be you... Just like you’ve done for the rest of us.”

“I really think you’re overestimating me...”

If there was some “power” that had caused everyone to change, I didn’t think it was mine. Maybe more like the power in manga, anime, and games... or something like that. And maybe, at the same time, the power inside of everyone to find something meaningful in those things.

All I did was to offer them up and say, “What do you think?”

I didn’t really feel like I was responsible for any of it—but then, that had been my stance in this world all along. I just focused on the anime and manga and so on; that was my job. The moment I forgot that was the moment I would become a real invader.

That was... To me, that was all there was to it.

But...

“Overestimating? *Over*estimating?!” Elvia exclaimed. “Me and Big Sis Ama are back to being sisters again!”

“But that...” That really had just happened naturally. I interrupted my own objection, though, and said, “Wait...”

I started to rethink things, just a little.

I definitely wasn’t the only hardcore otaku out there with a sort of low opinion of myself, all too used to being mocked and marginalized by the world at large. I wasn’t the only one it left with a particular kind of weird stubborn streak, an insistence on discounting myself. Like how, if someone said something nice about me, I just wasn’t willing to accept it.

I would assume there had to be an ulterior motive, or tell myself that happiness goeth before the fall.

But what was the point of shooting down every compliment I ever got?

“It really makes me happy to hear that,” I finally said with a bit of a smile. “Thanks.”

Myusel and Elvia looked at each other, briefly speechless.

But then they found their voices and, grinning ear to ear, they chorused, “Of course!”

Chapter Four: Vanishing Magic?

It happened very suddenly.

I was at school, like normal. It was break time, like normal. Everything was just the way it always was. There would have been nothing worth mentioning, except for what came next.

In the classroom, everyone was playing with the magically controlled action figures with which the entire student body (it had gone well beyond the dwarves now) was obsessed.

"I told you, my name isn't Bunny..." One person was playing with a figure from a certain "buddy hero" anime.

"The only ones you can shoot are the ones who are ready to be shot!" Another was playing with a figure of a character from *Order of the Dark Knights: Zero's Revenge*, who saw a lot of use.

"I'm such a fool..." And still another had a *Rental ☆Madoka* character.

They were each playing in their own way, in their own space. The desks became miniature stages for acting out scenes from anime.

Until they weren't.

To everyone's shock, and virtually simultaneously, the figures collapsed to the desktops like puppets whose strings had been cut. *Clack, clack, clack.* They fell over like they had been mowed down by some kind of weapon. Without the magic that had been bringing them to life, they returned to being inert objects.

The students all looked on, dumbfounded.

"Wha...?"

I don't know who made the first sound of confusion and alarm. Everyone immediately started muttering their spells again, trying to bring the figures back. But none of the characters got up; none even twitched. I guess you wouldn't normally expect them to—they were toys, after all—but the way they lay like bodies scattered around the room was unsettling.

Even that, though, turned out to be nothing but a foreshock.

".....Oh."

I don’t know who collapsed first, but a number of students went thumping to the floor. It almost looked like they were imitating the figures—like some kind of disease had jumped from the characters to the people.

“What the heck?!

“So sleepy...” Loek muttered, and then down he went—right beside Romilda, who had shoved herself up against the wall but was sliding slowly to the ground.

“Seriously, what?! What in the world is going on here?!” I shouted.

I had seen the figures stop moving before. But the students?!

Hang on... I did remember that when the action figures stopped working, Romilda and the others had been trying not to yawn. Was this somehow related?

“Sensei?!”

Some of the students looked at me, panicked, but I was even more confused than they were and didn’t know what to do.

“What in the heck...?”

Some students were down, yes. But others seemed unaffected. And the difference between the two groups was...

“It’s only the elves and dwarves?!”

Yep. Only the elves and the dwarves were going unconscious. The human students in the classroom were all in perfectly normal condition, while the elves and dwarves took a collective nap.

But that meant...

“Myusel?!”

With a start, I turned toward the faithful maid who was at my side even here in the classroom.

I couldn’t get a word out of her.

“Myusel!”

When I called her name a second time, she flinched a little and her eyes drifted open. She looked deeply fatigued, though, and her whole body was limp.

It looked like the Sandman was really on a rampage...

“What’s wrong, Myusel?”

“I’m... sorry, Master.” She shook her head. “I’m just so... sleepy.”

“Sleepy? What do you mean, sl—”

Why so suddenly? Did it have something to do with why the students

couldn’t use magic anymore?!

“Sensei—”

“My magic...”

Students called out to me plaintively. None of their magic was working. Some of them were apparently trying to use spells to revive their collapsed classmates, but they weren’t getting anything out of it. It didn’t seem to be that the spells weren’t having any effect, so much as that the magic itself didn’t even function.

Was this—

what Petralka was talking about...?

Localized fluctuations in magic? A deficit of magical power?

“No way...”

I could feel my heart starting to race with panic.

Magic was to this world something like electricity was to ours. People just took it for granted; it supported everything they did in their lives. Suppose all the electricity suddenly disappeared for no reason we could discover—imagine what would happen.

Had the elves and dwarves collapsed because of something to do with the missing magic? And if they had...

A shout sounded in the buzzing classroom. “*What* is *that*?!”

Several students were looking out the window and pointing. I looked out, too...

...and took the world’s biggest *gulp*.

A dark, round pillar stood there. It stretched up into the sky as if connecting heaven and earth, dividing the world in two, a great, black streak. I couldn’t tell how far away it was, but one thing was for sure: it was big, big, big.

It widened and narrowed, twisted and writhed, making it look more like a waterspout than anything—but I didn't hear the moaning rush of air you usually associate with natural phenomena like that.

When I looked really closely, I could see little blinking lights around the pillar, flashing and vanishing, countless numbers of them. It was like the pillar was turning and twisting, and they were being sucked in. The pillar was hideous and deeply unsettling.

"What the heck is going on?!" someone exclaimed. Between the sudden loss of magic, their friends spontaneously falling asleep, and the sudden appearance of the bizarre thing outside, confusion and fear began to run through the students.

"Why does *this* have to be when we lose magic?!"

"Are we all going to die here?!"

"Oh noooo!"

The students all tried to pile through the classroom door at once, hoping to get out. A few of them tried to invoke spells, but of course, they didn't do anything—and that only made the panic worse.

"E-Everyone, just calm down!" I, along with the still somewhat drowsy Myusel, tried to bring something resembling order to the classroom, but my voice didn't carry over the din.

Then, a woman came rushing into the room. "Shinichi-kun!"

"Minori-san!"

Minori-san fought her way past the tidal wave of students by sheer physical force, then came running over to me.

"The—The magic just vanished," I said. "And Loek and the others collapsed... And then this weird thing—!"

"I know. The entire school is in an uproar."

So whatever was happening—it was affecting not just this classroom, but the entire school building? Maybe the entire region?

Minori-san looked around the classroom, her expression serious. And then—

"I need everyone to *please calm down*!"

There was an earsplitting roar that instantly caused the entire room to fall silent. Talk about fighting fire with fire. Everyone was focused on Minori-san, who stood there holding her 9mm over her head. The 9mm she'd just discharged into the ceiling.

“Panicking is not going to solve anything,” she announced to the suddenly quiet classroom. “For the moment, the *only* things we know are that something has caused magic to stop working, and that the elves and dwarves are feeling sleepy. Nothing’s on fire, we haven’t been hit by any earthquakes or tsunamis or anything else. So calm down. Those who can still move, I want you to go back to your homes. If further evacuation turns out to be necessary, we’ll contact you there to let you know.”

The students looked at each other. Minori-san turned to me and Myusel. “I’ve already contacted the JSDF garrison. They’re on their way with two LAVs and an emergency medical kit. We should let them tend to the elf and dwarf students.”

“Okay... Right.”

“As for us, we need to go to Eldant Castle. Her Majesty may well already be aware of the situation, but I think we should report what’s happened here.”

“Y-Yes’m!”

She holstered her gun amid this flurry of instructions. I just nodded. That was a soldier for you. Cool and collected no matter how weird or scary things got. Reliable. I was so grateful Minori-san was here right now...

“Still,” I said, “I just don’t understand what happened here.”

“Only the elves and dwarves collapsed?” Minori-san asked.

“Right,” I said.

“But Myusel’s okay?”

“Er—”

Minori-san and I turned to look at Myusel. She definitely looked tired, but she hadn’t collapsed or fallen asleep; she was standing right there.

“It’s a little... hard to think clearly... but I’m all right,” she said.

“So you are affected by it,” Minori-san said, looking thoughtful.

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’m guessing it’s because Myusel is only half elf. This magical-deficiency phenomenon only really affects elves and dwarves, who are ‘sprite-like’ themselves.”

“So you’re saying...”

Elves and dwarves had greater magical powers than humans. Maybe that was a way of saying that they were the best adapted to handle magic. Might it even be fair to say that, like dragons, they were almost “half-sprite”?

And if they were...

“What if magic has something to do with their bodies’ metabolism?”

I caught my breath. Magical metabolism stopping due to a deficiency in magical power. What if that was what had made Loek and Romilda so sleepy...?

“Myusel, I’m sorry, but I have to ask you to stay behind,” Minori-san said. “When Captain Satou gets here, work with him and his men. With you to study, they might be better able to treat the elves and dwarves.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Myusel nodded several times as if trying to shake off the fatigue, then clenched her fist.

“Everyone, listen up,” Minori-san said, addressing the students again. “I want calm and order! At the current moment, there doesn’t appear to be any effect on humans, so don’t panic and do anything stupid!”

“Y...Yes, ma’am!” The students nodded, then Minori-san grabbed me by the collar, exclaiming, “Shinichi-kun, let’s go!”

“Y-Yeah, sure...!”

She dragged me out of the classroom. The students and Myusel watched me go apprehensively. I shouted back to them, “Listen to Minori-san, everyone! And Myusel—you’ve got this!”

It was all I could do, considering none of us had any idea what was going on.

Minori-san and I collected Hikaru-san, who was in another room, and then rushed to Holy Eldant Castle. The birds who pulled the carriages must not have been magical creatures, because they went as fast as ever. I hated to think how long it would have taken if we’d had to walk.

Telling the guards we had something very important to tell Petralka was our ticket to a prompt audience. The castle, though, was already in such chaos that people hardly noticed us. Some were pacing this way and that. Knights, many of them presumably headed for places where people had collapsed, rushed around and shouted; they obviously didn’t have time to stop and chat.

The place looked less like a castle than a war zone—the front lines.

“What in the world...”

What was happening here?

We waited anxiously in the audience chamber, and a short while later Petralka appeared, following Prime Minister Zahar at a quick pace. She didn’t even sit on the throne, but said with a stern expression, “You may dispense with greetings and preamble. Be brief.”

She sounded almost belligerent—but that only went to make clear how desperate the situation was. In fact, I had never seen Petralka like this before.

Minori-san gave the report: “We saw some kind of black pillar from the school. At the same time, the students became unable to use magic, and the elf and dwarf students collapsed.”

“We might have guessed,” Petralka said sourly.

“You might have?” I asked in surprise.

“We spoke to you previously of the strange state of the sprites, did we not?”

“Er, yeah...” And she had said she would tell us if they found out anything else.

“In some areas the number of sprites has dropped dramatically, wreaking havoc with the average amount of magic. Normally, such fluctuations would quickly correct themselves, but this decrease in sprites and magical power is of a different magnitude from normal. We still don’t know what’s causing it, but that magic-absorbing twister is the effect.”

“Magic... absorbing?”

“The reason magic is ceasing to function is the same reason it can’t be used around a dragon. But the source this time is not a living being. Instead, it’s that whirlpool-like phenomenon.”

“You mean, like, there’s a big magical void, and nearby magic is rushing to fill the gap?”

“Precisely,” Petralka nodded.

I immediately pictured the drain of a bathtub.

“Elves and dwarves rely more on magical power than we humans do,” the empress said. “That is why they’ve fallen asleep. The royal physicians advise us that the condition is by no means incurable... but it is unprecedented. That means we can’t be certain of anything.”

“Gosh...”

“Our mages tell us that these drop-outs in magic are happening only in particular places, and haven’t yet spread to the whole of Marinos. The phenomenon isn’t occurring at this castle, for example. But no one can predict when or where it may happen.”

“So it’s not just places near that pillar?”

“Our mages inform us that thing is a ‘shade,’” Petralka said. “A mirage, one might call it. The pillar itself is not absorbing the magic. Somewhere nearby, probably near the base of the pillar, something is causing the whirlpool.”

“An illusion...?”

“At the moment, we have our knights and all the palace mages investigating how much damage has been done. So far there are no reports of any fatalities, but there is no small number of workshops, hospitals, and other places that depend on magic to function.”

Magic was just a presupposition in this country—in this world, in fact. If it suddenly disappeared, people’s idea of “normal” would be turned upside down. It would be like a large-scale blackout in our own world, one that could occur anywhere at any time.

In other words, it was a big, ugly deal.

But what the heck were we going to do about it?

“The residents of the castle town have been urged to evacuate, just in case the worst should happen,” Prime Minister Zahar said. “I would encourage you, Shinichi-dono, and all the Amutech staff, to do the same.”

I didn’t say anything at first. His point was that in an extreme case, we had no idea what might happen. But then...

“Petralka, what about you?” I asked suddenly.

“Hrm? What about us, indeed?”

“Well, I mean... are you evacuating?”

“Don’t be foolish.” Petralka frowned. “We are the imperial ruler. And this is Marinos, the capital and key to our empire. This is *our* city. We shall remain here to the last, whatever may befall it.”

“But that’s...”

Things were so bad they had told the citizens to evacuate. And Petralka herself wasn’t going to leave? I thought in manga and anime, the ruler was always the first to get to a safe location.

“Even Garius and his knights have been sent into the thick of it. Shall I

alone run away?"

I couldn't answer.

"Don't look so afraid. For the time being, this phenomenon appears to have no effect on humans." Petralka tried to smile encouragingly.

There was this tiny, brave empress boldly facing a national disaster.

It made my heart ache.

"Your Majesty..." Minori-san began. "As I believe you know, the hyperspace wormhole is at the bottom of that black pillar."

"Wait, there is?!" I exclaimed stupidly.

Petralka, who apparently *had* known all along, gave a small nod.

Hikaru-san, standing beside me, didn't look surprised either, so it looked like I was the only one who had been out of the loop on this.

"The origins of the wormhole has never been fully explained," Minori-san said. "But it's been conjectured that it occurs naturally via some sort of magical power."

I swallowed heavily at that. Did that mean the hyperspace tunnel could close, too?!

"If the wormhole disappears, we lose our way home, so this matters a lot to us. All the members of the Eldant Division are standing ready with full equipment. Our gear doesn't use magic, so it isn't affected by this phenomenon. I humbly request your permission for us to respond to this situation and take autonomous action where necessary—this request comes directly from Captain Satou, commander of the Eldant Division."

"We would welcome your assistance," the prime minister said with a nod.

Minori-san spoke up again, but this time she didn't sound quite as confident. "I think you may already realize this Your Majesty, Prime Minister... but we're dealing with magical power and sprites here. A corporeal being like a dragon is one thing, but we don't know how well our equipment will or won't work against a 'shade.'"

"All too true," Petralka said, looking nonplussed.

I could see where she was coming from. The JSDF, ultimately, used conventional—physical—weapons. What would they do to a magical phenomenon? Nobody knew. Considering that magic could have physical effects, you couldn't argue that they were totally unconnected... But we didn't know how any of this worked, and we might end up pouring a lot of

firepower into someplace where it wasn't going to do any good.

"We will not, of course, leave you to do everything on your own. We shall be attempting to do the best we can. However—Shinichi, Hikaru, the two of you must evacuate. We have an escort of knights and a swift carriage prepared for you."

"But Petralka... We're humans. There shouldn't be any danger to—"

"There is no way of knowing what has happened or will happen to the vanished magic," Petralka said. "It may spontaneously manifest as fire or lightning. Perhaps directly on top of you, Shinichi."

I swallowed a breath. "But that means—"

That meant Petralka was in the same danger.

"We did not come here to debate. This is an order! We thank you for your report."

Then Petralka turned her back on us.

"Come," she said, and the knights who had been standing at the entrance of the audience chamber walked up to us and ushered us along.

"Petralka!" I shouted.

Just for a second, she stopped. She didn't look back, though—and then she left the room.

There was no more reason for me to be here. But that conversation nagged at me. It's like in a game, when someone says something, and you just know they're going to die. It felt tragic, like a captain going down with the ship. Or was I just overthinking it?

My thoughts were interrupted by Minori-san, who whispered quietly to me, "Let's go."

We went through the halls. Down the stairs. Guided by the knights, we worked our way toward the main gate of Eldant Castle to evacuate.

Nobody said anything. Under the circumstances, none of us had it in us to talk.

Was the Eldant Empire going to be okay? Was Petralka? I felt anxiety pressing on my chest, but I couldn't express it. And even if I could, so what? It wouldn't mean anything more than a kid throwing a temper

tantrum.

Then, suddenly, I saw something out the corner of my eye.

The storeroom.

The door, the one behind which lurked a dangerous weapon.

As we approached it, then passed by, I had a thought.

The black pillar that had appeared so suddenly was like a whirlpool that sucked in sprites and magical power. A natural phenomenon caused by a decisive imbalance in magic.

A phenomenon... like a typhoon or a waterspout.

In other words, not something fixed and concrete, but something created by an imbalance in the environment, a distortion. It was so big and so powerful that we could all too easily forget that it was fundamentally unstable.

And that meant...

My mind started to race. I'd heard that some country—America or someplace—once had a plan to drop bombs onto hurricanes to neutralize them. Apparently the plan had failed because it turned out hurricanes had so much energy that even a nuclear bomb or two wouldn't have done the trick.

Wordlessly, we emerged outside. There was a bird-drawn carriage waiting at the castle gate, which was standing open. The knights ushered Minori-san and Hikaru-san into the carriage. I heard someone muttering, and then I realized it was me.

"You can use bombs to put out a fire in an oil field, after all..."

"Shinichi-kun?" Minori-san looked at me, trying to figure out why I wasn't getting into the carriage. "What's wrong? Hurry up and—"

"Minori-san, I've got an idea."

"Huh?"

"I don't know if it'll work, but... there's only one way to find out."

"What are you talking ab—"

"You guys go on ahead!" I interrupted, then ran into the castle. I heard Minori-san and the knights shouting after me to stop, but I ignored them.

I knew this was crazy, but we had an emergency on our hands. We had to do whatever we could. If this worked, it would save everyone. Me and my friends, the knights and mages who had gone to investigate that pillar—and Petralka, here in the castle.

"Gosh, I'm acting like a real MC for once!"

I hoped my little joke would take some of the tension out of my limbs as I ran for the room where they kept Imarufe Bisurupeguze.

My name is Kanou Shinichi, otaku and former home security guard.

.....

All that really means is that I don't have ESP, amazing strength in battle, or anything else. I don't really have any of the qualities you would expect of a protagonist in a story.

And so...

"Stupid, stupid me..."

What had I been doing, trying to act like an MC? I was just a naïve idiot all along.

"Arrrgh... What am I gonna do?"

The way I came dashing in like an awesome hero, that was good.

The fact that I miraculously didn't get lost, that was good, too.

But then I stood there in front of the storeroom door, and it hit me.

"It won't open..."

The door was shut tight. I pushed and pulled on the handle, but it didn't budge. I assumed I was dealing with more than a conventional lock here. It was probably like the system of magical keys we used at the mansion. Which meant the door might open for somebody, but it wouldn't be for me.

Then I remembered—Petralka had said something about it not being easy to get the bomb out of there. It should have been obvious! Geez, I was even more of an idiot than I thought! How embarrassing! I wish there was a hole here so I could dive right into it!

"Umm..."

Maybe I could go to Petralka and explain my idea to her, and get her to open the door? But I had no idea where the empress was at that moment. I only ever saw her in one of the audience chambers or in the training room. If she had an office or something, I didn't know about it, and given that this was a crisis, she might well be in some kind of war room or something.

I was just upbraiding myself once more for having let myself hit a dead end like this when I saw someone coming down the hall.

“Hey...”

Holy heck.

It wasn’t Petralka or Prime Minister Zahar, obviously, but it was still someone I recognized.

“Lauron?!”

“Shinichi-sensei...?” She stopped and looked at me in surprise.

“Wh-What are you doing here...!?” Lauron watched me with her usual impassive expression as I came running up to her. “Didn’t they tell you to evacuate?”

“Evacuate?” Lauron blinked.

“Everyone who lives near the castle was ordered to get away.”

“I see. But it’s time for our practice with the puppet of Her Majesty.”

“Hello...?”

I guess she had come to the castle right on time, as always, still following her internal rules. I was amazed she’d made it this far, but maybe the knights had been too busy to stop one young girl wandering through the castle. Heck, they hadn’t stopped me, either.

“Let’s go, Sensei. We’re going to be late.”

“How can you worry about that? Didn’t you see that weird thing?”

“I saw it. But it’s practice time now.”

“I’m telling you...”

I had passed through anger at having the same conversation with Lauron over and over and arrived at simple exhaustion. We were beyond obsession here. There was obviously no persuading her, and if I tried to force her to run away, there was a good chance she would just start crying.

Argh, why do I have to deal with this now of all—

“...Wait.” I suddenly had an idea. “Lauron, come here for a moment. You see that door? It’s magically locked. Think you might be able to open it?”

“Impossible,” she said flatly. “This type of magic can only be undone by the one who cast it.”

“I guess you’ve got me there...” I hung my head, disheartened. But at that moment...

Ba-bum.

We heard a dull, heavy noise.

I turned to look and saw that the door, which had been shut tight, was ever so slightly ajar.

“Huh...? Wh-Why’d it just...?”

I hadn’t done anything special.

As I stood there flabbergasted, though, Lauron said, “The magic has disappeared.”

I caught my breath. The vanishing magic! Petralka had said nobody knew when or where it might occur...

“Er, Lauron, are you okay?”

“Am I okay how?”

“I mean, dwarves...” I thought they usually got tired when the magic drained away. But Lauron was standing there looking perfectly steady and alert. “Don’t dwarves fall asleep when they lose their magic?”

“Ah. Yes. But I have this.” Lauron reached back and produced a crystal about the size of a closed fist. When I looked closely, I could see a faint glow shifting and shimmering within the jewel. Were those... sprites?

I remembered now that the Faldra had had a magical gem in its chest...

“Underground, you sometimes run into places where magic is weak, especially in newly excavated tunnels. All dwarven workers carry one of these.”

“Sort of like an oxygen tank, huh...”

Unlike Lauron, the dwarf students at school were the children of the privileged, and didn’t have to spend their time cooped up in workshops or digging out tunnels. They didn’t need, or carry, “magic tanks” like this one. But since Lauron had come to the castle directly from work, she had hers with her.

Anyway...

“All right, then, Lauron, come with me.”

I decided it was actually a stroke of good luck that she’d shown up. Imarufe Bisurupeguze, the Consuming Flame, was a magical weapon. I had seen how it was used when the Assembly of Patriots took over the school,

and between that and what Petralka had told me earlier, I had a pretty good idea of what to do with it. But even so, being basically a complete novice when it came to handling magic, I was awfully glad to have Lauron along.

Lauron, though, was shaking her head. “That’s not allowed.” Her tone was firm, without a hint of hesitation. Was this about her “rules” again?

“This is an emergency,” I said. “If we use the thing in there, we might be able to do something about that weird pillar.”

“But that isn’t allowed.” My desperation didn’t appear to have the slightest effect on her. In fact, now she was holding onto my arm with both hands. “What we’re supposed to do now is practice with the doll. Let’s go, Sensei.”

“Ow, that hurts!” She was startlingly strong for someone so small. “Just—just wait a minute!” I sank my weight and tried to resist being dragged away. “This is no time to be worrying about that! Lauron, listen to me! I need you to help me—or if you really can’t, then at least let go of me!”

“N—”

“I’m begging you! Please, we don’t have time to go through the same stupid conversation over and over!” I tried to talk too quickly for her to object. “Let’s be flexible, please!”

Wordlessly, Lauron let go of my hand, seeming surprised. Maybe she was startled to hear me yell—not that I was really *yelling*, but it might have sounded like it. I had never really raised my voice to her before.

“B... But...” Her expression stiffened, her voice suddenly thick. “We have to... obey the rules... Or else...”

Those huge eyes filled up even as I watched, the tears forcing their way down her cheeks.

Arrrrgh, again?

Expressionless or crying: it seemed like she only had two moods, and they were on opposite ends of the emotional spectrum.

“I can’t do it,” she wailed. “I feel sick...”

It was just like at practice. If she was about to break her internal rules, her emotional response kicked in and made her cry before she could consider whether or not it was rational. And once she was in this state, she would stop thinking and just give herself over to the tears.

No... She had never *been* thinking. She set up rules to keep from having to worry about anything—and then she just followed them, unreflectively,

like a puppet. It was almost as if she herself was under a curse that had turned her into a doll. And as bad as I felt for her, I didn't have time to coddle her right then.

"Stop crying!"

"Hic...?" She caught her breath a little, shocked to hear me shout.

"You think you're going to solve anything by sitting there bawling?!"

"Sob... sniff..." Lauron wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands.

I took her face, tears and all, in my hands and looked into her eyes. "It's important to keep your word," I said. "I think you're right to do it—most of the time. But don't get obsessed with obeying the rules. Don't you feel like you should think about what will *happen* if you obey the rules—and what will happen if you *don't*?"

Lauron looked at me, seeming completely flummoxed.

I said firmly, "You told us that bird died because you forgot to take care of it, right? I'll bet that was really unpleasant. I'm sure you felt bad about it. That's why you're so set on following specific rules, instead of just messing around, right?"

Still she didn't speak.

"But we're not talking about a bird here. Humans—in fact, dwarves and elves, maybe someone you know—might die here! If we let this get any worse, it might be too late. People might start getting hurt!"

"...hic..." Lauron's eyes were wide.

"But if we can use Imarufe Bisurupeguze to neutralize that pillar... Well, people might get mad at us for taking matters into our own hands, but that's all. If it works, we'll save everybody."

Lauron couldn't quite seem to decide where to put her eyes. They had stopped running with tears, though. All that was left were the tracks on her cheeks.

"What was it really that made you feel so bad? Was it being shouted at because you didn't take care of that bird? Or was it the fact that the bird died? Or was there something else?"

"I..."

For the first time, I thought I heard a note of doubt in her voice. One more push might be all it would take.

"What do you want to do? Don't tell me what it is that you *should* do. Your responsibility. Tell me what it is that you *want* to do—."

Geez—only a lost-cause otaku like me could fall back on a line from a robot anime at a desperate moment like this. I guess a Byar**nt Custom would be overkill in the situation, though...

Okay, forget about that.

“I...” Lauron looked down. I could see how torn she was. But we were running out of time.

“If somebody doesn’t do something, people could end up dead.”

No response.

“You said you have to follow the rules. Are you bothered by the fact that you haven’t been able to control the puppet? Or that you were shunned by your friends? Or is it that you let that bird die?”

There was an instant’s hesitation before Lauron whispered, “It’s that... that I let it die.”

Finally, I had gotten an answer. After all this time mindlessly forcing herself to obey rules, Lauron had thought it over and given the answer herself. She’d finally faced the reality she’d been trying to run from through mindless obedience.

That was important progress for her, I was sure. So I wasn’t surprised to see, when she looked up at me a moment later, that she looked somehow different from before. Just a little. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“I understand. I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you!”

I shoved open the door, and Lauron and I started into the storeroom.

Before us was a spiral staircase that led down, down, down, as if into the depths of hell.

It was dusty in there, and with no windows, it was dark, too. Without the faint light provided by Lauron’s magic tank (or whatever it was), we wouldn’t have been able to see our hands in front of our faces.

It made some sense: light is one thing you don’t want in a storage area. Along with oxygen and temperature changes, it’s one of the primary causes of material degradation. I should have expected this.

“Umm...” I strained my eyes, looking around the storeroom, which was

full of a haphazard collection of items. Swords and bows, things that were obviously weapons. But then there were also mirrors and chairs, things that looked totally random at first glance. There was even a fancy dress. Knowing how closely this area was guarded, I had to assume even these seeming cast-offs were really magical items of some sort...

"...There."

In fact, though, the storage area wasn't that big. It wasn't long before I found what we were looking for. Sitting on a shelf was a silver sphere. It had a wooden frame around it to keep it from rolling away, and it was surrounded by interlinked silver rings. It would have been easy to take it for nothing more than a globe.

But this was Imarufe Bisurupeguze, the Consuming Flame.

What's more, beside it was a sort of metal card. If you inserted the card into a slot on the side of Imarufe Bisurupeguze and intoned the spell, the fire sprites inside would fly out all at once, causing something like an explosion. Or so I had been told.

I picked up the card first, then made to grab the weapon...

"Hrgh?!"

I pitched forward. This thing was heavy! What the heck was in it?!

From the shape, I'd assumed it was just a heavy globe, but this thing had to weigh more than thirty kilograms. What in the world was it made out of?!

It was going to be a very slow trek back up those stairs at this rate.

"What am I going to do?" I muttered, looking around the room, but I didn't see anything obviously helpful.

"Shinichi-sensei?"

"It's too heavy. And we need to move fast," I said softly.

Lauron's voice rang through the small room. "*Ia ma esu reruu fo esu surae ruree fo esu kou ruree fo nori zurou fo suruto esu shisabu fo iteirosua ia riu redoro ti shi irarobumetto eshiirupu uorofu imu suredoro.*" The words meant: I take upon myself the True Words and the rights of the Chieftain of Earth, the Chieftain of Rock, and the Chieftain of Steel, and I order, howsoever briefly, that they obey my words.

No sooner had she spoke than, to my surprise, some of the packed earth at my feet rose up into a misshapen but humanoid form. A clay doll. Like the ones they used in the dwarven workshops...

“I get it...” The magical deficits were localized, and subject to fluctuations. Apparently, magic was still usable down here. “That’s a huge help!” I grinned at Lauron as the clay doll picked up Imarufe Bisurupeguze.

“Yes, sir.”

And for probably the first time since I’d met her, Lauron gave me a genuinely happy smile.

I heard someone call my name as we kept back to the castle gate.

“Shinichi-kun!” I looked up to see Minori-san running up—from *behind* us.

Huh? Why?

“What on earth are you doing?!” she demanded as she caught us.

“Minori-san, why are you—”

“You think I was just going to evacuate by myself, without you?! I’m your bodyguard, for crying out loud!”

“...Oh.”

I realized what had happened: Minori-san had gone into the castle after me but had lost track of me somewhere along the line. So when we came back out, Minori-san was likewise heading back to the gate.

“I had Hikaru-kun go ahead and get out of here, but—wait, Lauron, what are you doing here?”

“Ah... Well...”

“And what’s *that*?!”

She was talking about the clay doll behind us, carrying Imarufe Bisurupeguze. It was only thanks to this helper—thanks to Lauron’s magic—that we had managed to get the heavy, unwieldy object out here so quickly. In fact, we’d run into one of the magic vacuums on the way out, which had caused the clay doll to disintegrate. Between us, Lauron and I had somehow managed to carry Imarufe Bisurupeguze past the dead spot. Lauron was small, but being a dwarf, she was a lot stronger than she looked.

And now...

“Arrgh... You can fill me in on the details later. Hop in!” Minori-san

said, pointing to the bird-drawn carriage standing by the gate. It wasn't the same one that had been waiting for us earlier. I guess after evacuating Hikaru-san, Minori-san must have had them get a new one ready.

"Get in! You too, Lauron! We've got to get out of—"

"Wait, Minori-san," I said as she tried to shove me into the passenger compartment. "Have them take us to that black pillar."

"Are you insane?!"

"We're going to use this thing to blow it away," I said. "Like how they use bombs to fight oil field fires."

"That's completely—" Minori-san began, but then she stopped, her expression turning thoughtful. She seemed to be giving my idea due consideration, for which I was very grateful.

Finally...

"Okay. It's at least worth a shot. But I have a duty to protect you," she added firmly. "*After* I get you two out of here, I'll take that thing to the vortex. And then—"

"We don't have time for that!"

I didn't know where they planned to evacuate us to, but if Minori-san meant to see us to a safe location before going back to the pillar, she wouldn't get there for a long time. Plus, it would be hard to find yet another carriage when half the city was trying to get away all at once.

"Even inside the castle, there are places where magic is dropping out. You know how we got into where they keep Imarufe Bisurupeguze? The magic keeping the door locked dropped out." I looked at Lauron for confirmation, and she nodded. "The castle is nowhere near that vortex, and look what's happening. This loss of magic is only going to get worse, right?

If we just took our time, eventually it might be impossible to use magic anywhere. And if that happened...

"They use magic to heal illnesses and injuries around here, right? What if a magical void appears where they're doing that—we're talking fatalities, right?!"

"That's..." I could see Minori-san looking lost behind her glasses.

"So we have to hurry up and *do something*!"

There was always the possibility that Garius and the others *were* trying to do something, something different than what I'd come up with.

But there was also the possibility that they wouldn't be able to do

anything at all.

If I hadn't known about the extinguishing-oil-fields-with-bombs thing, I would never have thought to fight a magic-sucking whirlwind with a magical bomb. And what if this really was the only way to deal with that thing?

"All right," Minori-san said with a sigh, my urgency at last bringing her around. "But if this all goes south, don't come crying to me."

"You got it!"

"Lauron, put that thing on the luggage rack in the back! Use the clay doll to keep it in place!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Now that she was convinced, Minori-san acted quickly—that military resolve again.

So our carriage headed for the menacing black whirlwind, with Imarufe Bisurupeguze on board.

Fresh, green grass spread out as far as the eye could see. The breeze sent lazy ripples through it, like waves on a verdant sea. Under any other circumstances it would have been downright idyllic—but at that moment, everything felt tense and nervous.

That had to do with what was directly above the virtually curative beauty of nature spread out before us.

It hung there like some bad joke. Like a tear down the middle of a photograph. The vast, black thing loomed dauntingly in the air, seeming to come down from roiling, ash-colored clouds.

This was bad, bad news. It looked like it had gotten several times bigger since we spotted it from the school.

I could hear shouting in Eldant. There, beneath that great black tower, a whole crowd of people was rushing around as if their lives depended on it. Most were armed knights, but I could see the palace mages too, all wearing matching robes like some kind of uniform. The wizards kept trying to use magic, but it didn't look like it was working. They did have items that looked sort of like Lauron's magic tank (?), but no sooner had the magic

been woven into a spell than, in the blink of an eye, it was broken back down into magical power and whisked away into the whirlwind.

Apparently, normal magic wasn't going to do it. This was the first time, though, that the people of Eldant—in fact, anyone in this world—had experienced anything like this, and they weren't sure what to do. The only way to proceed was by trial and error, but they didn't have nearly enough time for that.

Mixed in among the knights and mages, I spotted camo-clad JSDF soldiers.

"Oh..."

I could see one of them firing a rocket launcher, a 110mm LAM like Minori-san had used once. The missile left a white smoke trail as it flew into the storm. An LAM is an anti-tank weapon, so it isn't equipped to explode in the air. It must have met some kind of physical resistance, though—or maybe it had something to do with being sucked into the clouds—because the projectile exploded in a burst of light.

We could hear the roar over our heads... but that was it. The black pillar didn't look any the worse for wear.

"No good, huh," I groaned, watching from the bird-drawn carriage as we drew closer. "I guess conventional weapons really aren't going to do it..."

"Doesn't look like it," Minori-san agreed, squinting behind her glasses.

This was awful. I could feel a tragedy coming on. If you'd told me this was the last day this world would ever see, I would have believed you—and I think most of the people around me would have, too.

"So... what exactly is it that you plan to do?" One of the knights directed the carriage to a stop, and Minori-san took that moment to quiz me on my idea.

"Well, obviously, I'm going to use Imarufe Bisurupeguze on that thing. The way I remember it, this bomb releases highly pressurized fire sprites, which are already inside, to create an explosion. So I'm thinking that unlike a magic spell that works on magic in the environment, this thing won't fizzle out."

"But isn't that pillar supposed to be a shade?" Minori-san said. "And wouldn't that mean that bombing it wouldn't have any effect on anything?"

"If you pull the stopper out of a bathtub, you get a little whirlpool around the drain, right? If we put the bomb in that black pillar, I bet it'll get

carried right to the source."

"Okay... But I was thinking on the way here..." Minori-san's expression turned grim. "What if the drain in your metaphor turns out to be the hyperspace wormhole?"

I didn't answer immediately. I'd been wondering the same thing in a corner of my mind.

The magic power was being sucked away. But sucked away to where?

Presumably, to a place where there was no magical power.

A place like the other side of the wormhole.

And we still didn't understand much about how the wormhole worked. If we tossed a powerful magical weapon in there...

"If we block off the wormhole, the magic might stop draining away, but we'll lose our only way back to Japan," Minori-san said. "Or the wormhole might be unaffected, but that would only mean we were back at square one."

"That wormhole's basically always been open, right? And from the way the magic power turns into sprites, we can tell that a lot of different things influence it. If we can clear this pillar—this whirlwind—away, I think it'll be a while until we see another one. It should buy us some time to think of a solution."

"Shinichi-kun." Minori-san narrowed her eyes at me behind her glasses. "*We might never get back to Japan.*"

"...I know."

Whether likely or not, the risk was there.

"Every member of the JSDF who was sent over here was warned they might not come back, and we're all ready for that. What about you?"

I didn't say anything.

I was born in Japan, the country of anime and manga and games and light novels. To be unable to go home, to lose my link to it—being confronted with that possibility was enough to make me feel faint with despair. I'm a dyed-in-the-wool otaku. My parents were both otaku, so I'm an otaku twice over. Worst-case scenario, I would sell my soul for my beloved entertainments.

And yet...

Myusel... Romilda, Loek, everyone...

The way things were going, a whole bunch of people I knew were in a

whole lot of trouble. The elves and dwarves might never wake up again. Even half-elves like Myusel might be affected in the long term; we didn't know. For that matter, in the long term, the Holy Eldant Empire, built as it was on the assumption of magic, might crumble.

And then what would happen to Petralka?

As for me...

"I'm ready," I said firmly. "I've already got so many books and games and DVDs piled up that I could never get through all of them in one lifetime! I'll survive, even if that portal to Japan closes!"

After a long moment, Minori-san's expression softened. "Shinichi-kun," she said. I think she knew I was just trying to act tough.

"Look, Minori-san," I said. "I'm the one spouting hackneyed cool stuff about being ready for anything or whatever, but if our supply of BL books gets cut off, you're the one who's going to be in trouble, right?"

"......Heh...!"

She just snorted, as if to prove how little it mattered to her.

Huh? I'd expected her to be more upset.

"If that happens, the girls at school and I will just have to collaborate on a little book about you and Minister Cordobal and Hikaru-kun."

"Don't you dare!"

Suddenly, the situation seemed even more dangerous.

But anyway...

"So we take Imarufe Bisurupeguze. I assume we have to detonate it right near the bottom of that black pillar."

"Right there... hm," Minori-san murmured, glancing back at the bomb riding on the luggage rack behind us.

"For starters, Lauron, help us get Imarufe Bisurupeguze down from there," I said, turning to the dwarf.

Lauron, though, just blinked at me, not saying anything. It was like she hadn't understood what I'd said. And—

"Lauron?"

Was it just my imagination, or did she look pretty uncomfortable? Could it be...?

"Shinichi-kun. I'm guessing our magic rings aren't working." Minori-san indicated the rings we were both wearing.

"Huh? But..."

Back in Eldant Castle, the magic on the storeroom door had disappeared, but I had still been able to communicate normally with Lauron. It made sense, I thought, that the magic rings would stop working. But why here?

"It's got to be a question of how much magical power they need," Minori-san said. "The vacuum is especially powerful here, so even magical items like our rings stop working."

Thinking about it, I realized that even lizardmen, who allegedly had hardly any magic, could still converse using the rings. That suggested how little magical power the rings needed to do their job, whereas the magical seal on that door had probably required a significant and constant flow of magical energy.

"Oh no..."

I looked at the crystal "magic tank" Lauron kept at her hip. The light glowing inside it was getting weak—it looked like it might disappear at any moment.

This was bad news. Not only had our magic rings abandoned us, it looked like Lauron might not hold out much longer, either. Maybe she'd only fall asleep when her magic gave out, but...

"Mino—"

I was about to suggest to Minori-san that we get Lauron out of the carriage, when I was interrupted.

"...Shinichi, *rekaeto*..." Lauron pulled on my shirt.

Rekaeto was the Eldant word for "teacher."

Lauron nodded at me with obvious difficulty. She seemed to be telling me she was okay.

What was I going to do?

No... There was no time to hesitate. If Lauron said she was okay, then I had to trust her. The important thing was to do something about that pillar.

"Shinichi-kun, get ready," Minori-san said, then she tugged at the driver's collar and pointed to the whirlwind. Our magic rings might not be working, but it was pretty clear that she was saying *Go over there*.

The driver shook his head repeatedly—*Don't make me!*—but Minori-san pressed her point, and the carriage started moving.

"Shinichi-kun, interpret for me!" Minori-san shouted.

As much as we normally relied on the magic rings to communicate, I had been here long enough that I could actually speak a bit of the local

language. I could get across some simple ideas, ring or no ring.

"Everyone fall back, then brace for impact!" Minori-san shouted to her friends in the JSDF. "We're going to detonate a bomb in the target of your attack!"

"*Ia uooto shigamu bumobbu! Ekafu, nuuodo-rura!*"

Everyone—the soldiers, the knights, and the mages—turned when they heard Minori-san and me shouting. We rode past our shocked audience, our carriage heading for the base of the pillar.

At the same time, we started to get a look at the fissure in the earth, which we hadn't had a good view of before. That had to be the hyperspace wormhole. A fence, apparently put up by the Eldant forces, ran around it. And the pillar did indeed tower over that spot, as if emanating from a place just slightly above the gulf.

Then we crossed some invisible line, and suddenly we were close enough to the pillar to find wind hitting our carriage with astonishing force. It swept inward in a rush; I'll bet even sound couldn't escape it. I could see blinking lights around us, too. The magic density around the pillar must have been high enough to create sprites or other physical phenomena.

"Yikes..."

The carriage stopped.

Minori-san shoved the door open, refusing to be bested by the wind. Then she reached out to me. I took her hand, then held onto Lauron with my free hand and stepped outside.

In my peripheral vision, I could see the driver wrapping the reins around himself and hunkering down on the driver's bench, shaking. I had the distinct impression that if we hadn't been clutching the carriage, we would have been blown away.

And then what would happen?

Was this gale simply revolving, forming the center of the pillar? Or was it really a whirlpool that would ultimately suck us, along with the magic, down into the wormhole?

There was no time to investigate, and I sure didn't want to find out firsthand.

"Hrgh..."

The wind was getting stronger and stronger.

I squinted, looking up above my head. The huge black pillar hung in the

air as if it were bearing down on us. I craned my neck, trying to see how high it went, but quickly found myself in danger of falling over backward. It was so massive that simply by being there it made a human like me feel laughably trivial and small.

It was practically the picture of despair. Part of me wondered whether, if space elevators really existed, this was what they would look like. Okay, so it was totally irrelevant, but I couldn't help myself.

"Quick!" Minori-san shouted. I nodded, and we worked our way around the back of the carriage. We had to activate Imarufe Bisurupeguze. Obviously, Lauron's clay doll had long since turned to dust, and the wind had blown the dust away, leaving no trace.

"Argh..." When we reached the bomb, I groped for the small slot the card went into. With the wind pulling at my clothes and blowing my hair into my face, even this seemingly simple task was a major job. I couldn't even open my eyes properly. With my left hand I felt over Imarufe Bisurupeguze's surface—and finally found it.

"There it is!" I exclaimed, and with my other hand I went to put the card in the slot.

Except my finger slipped, and the card fell out of my hand.

As I watched the card flutter away like a leaf, I felt the blood drain from my entire body.

A split second later, though, someone reached out—and grabbed the card.

"Lauron?!"

Lauron had caught the card.

She had jumped through the air to get it, but now the wind threatened to carry her small body away into the void. I managed to reach out, though, and just hook my fingers around her belt.

"Ngggraahh!" With all my might, I struggled to pull her back. Instead, though, I started to feel myself being lifted up off the ground—until a second later, something grabbed *me* by the collar and pulled me back down. It was Minori-san.

"Shinichi-kun! Lauron!" Minori-san was using all her strength to drag us back to the ground. I felt like we were being pulled straight toward her chest—*her cheeeest! Ohh, the sweet softness!* No, no, of course I didn't have time to be thinking about that.

“Quick!” She all but flung me and Lauron toward Imarufe Bisurupeguze, and Lauron jammed the card into the side of the globe.

Perfect. Now all we had to do was recite the activation spell, and Imarufe Bisurupeguze would go off like... well, like a bomb.

If possible, though, I wanted to get our magical weapon closer to the black pillar...

“Huh?”

All of a sudden, Lauron was grabbing the weapon with both hands. She seemed to be in danger of floating away again, and Minori-san and I both latched onto her to weigh her down. Still holding the globe, she stretched out her arms and began to spin in a circle...

She shouted something, a very long stream of Eldant that I couldn’t understand. Then she gave a great, howling yell.

Remember this about dwarves: they may look small, but they’re immensely strong. Lauron was spinning so fast she looked like a propeller. Even for a dwarf, her strength seemed incredible. Maybe it was, you know, how people seem to get stronger during a crisis. Imarufe Bisurupeguze must have weighed thirty kilos at least. Lauron spun like a discus thrower...

...and with another stream of Eldant, she flung it away.

The bomb went flying toward the black pillar. Minori-san forcefully dragged Lauron and the driver inside the passenger compartment of the carriage, then reached out and pulled me in, too. I tried to follow Imarufe Bisurupeguze with my eyes as the door closed.

“*Rofu a esuakudouugu! Ia esu shisu reuoppu!* In the name of justice, I invoke this great power!” I shouted as loud as I could.

Fly, my voice!

An instant later, light washed over us.

The roar, and the shockwave, followed after.

“Nrrghh!”

The carriage was lifted into the air. It felt like being inside a giant saltshaker as we were thrown up and down.

Owowow—argh! What was what?!

I cried out, completely confused...

A few minutes later, as I regained my bearings, I realized I was draped over Lauron on the floor of the carriage.

At least it *was* the floor. That meant the carriage hadn’t been turned

over. Or maybe it had done a full 360 and just happened to land back on its wheels. I didn't know, and frankly, I didn't care. The shaking was over, and I didn't hear any roaring.

"I feel sick..." I said, clapping my hands over my mouth.

I looked to the side and saw Minori-san fallen on top of our driver, also on the floor. It looked like she'd made it through all right; she sat up and looked over at me. The driver, for his part, was still shaking.

"Ex... Excuse me..." I heard from the floor. "What happened...?" It was Lauron whispering. Her face was still pale, but she looked way better than she had a few minutes ago.

"Hey..." I suddenly realized I had understood her. That meant... "Minori-san!"

"Looks... like it worked," she said, trying to get a glance at the sky.

I hurried out of the carriage and looked up. The only thing I saw was a seemingly endless expanse of blue.

Nothing else. The massive, threatening black pillar was gone without a trace. Heck, there weren't even any clouds up there. Maybe Imarufe Bisurupeguze had blown away all the clouds, too?

"Man," I said, "that is some bomb..."

I marveled anew at the power of magical weaponry. When the Assembly of Patriots had brought the Consuming Flame into the school and threatened to blow the place up, I had imagined it had the power of several sticks of dynamite. But this thing—it seemed dangerously close to being on par with a nuclear weapon.

I heard furious shouting. "What just happened?! What the hell is going on?!"

I looked back to see a whole crowd rushing up to our carriage: JSDF soldiers, royal knights and mages, all rushing over. I didn't immediately see anyone who looked injured. They must have listened when we told them to get back. At the head of the whole group was Garius, his handsome good looks unfortunately coated in a film of dust and dirt. He must have been right out in front.

"Ahh..." I was just thinking about what a pain it was going to be to explain this one when Minori-san saved me by heading over to talk to everyone.

"Shinichi-sensei." Lauron got out of the carriage, too.

“It looks like no one’s hurt,” I said, turning to her. “Even the bird made it... I’m glad to say.”

The huge avian who pulled our carriage had sat down, thoroughly exhausted, in a sort of egg-incubating posture. But as far as I could tell, it was unhurt.

Then I turned to Lauron, who was standing beside me, and said, “Lauron, thank you.”

“Wha...?”

“I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t been here.”

I never would have gotten Imarufe Bisurupeguze out of the storeroom, I wouldn’t have caught the card when it went flying, and I definitely wouldn’t have been able to pitch the weapon into the whirlwind. All of that was thanks to her.

“What? But—I...” Lauron looked down awkwardly. “I didn’t think, I just...”

“To be able to do all that on instinct is really something.”

I really meant it. If I’d been in her place, I didn’t know if I could have pulled off the kind of eleventh-hour miracles she had.

“But I’ve b-... broken... the rules again...” Lauron’s lower lip was trembling again.

Caught up in the moment, she had done what had to be done—but I guess getting over a habit you’ve hammered into yourself for years and years doesn’t happen in the space of an afternoon. Maybe, faced with her impetuous actions, she was starting to feel sick again.

Well, I could hardly hold it against her. Again, a visceral emotional reaction isn’t something you just *decide* to get over.

Nonetheless, I said, “You’re right, we weren’t supposed to use Imarufe Bisurupeguze. But—using it was how we got rid of that thing.”

I looked around, and Lauron followed my gaze.

The cloudless blue sky spread out above us. And if we looked to earth, we could see smiling soldiers and knights and mages.

“All this is because of the way you improvised. Do you think that’s a bad thing?”

Lauron was silent. She just bit her lip as if she were holding something back and looked at the ground.

As for me, I looked back up at the sky. All the panic of just a few

minutes before had vanished like a mirage. All that was left was the breeze, causing lazy ripples in the grass.

It had been several days since the magical aberrations. Minori-san, Hikaru-san, Lauron, and I were all summoned to Eldant Castle.

“We are fully aware how desperate the situation was at that moment...”

We were in one of the audience chambers, lined up as usual in front of Petralka.

“But to abscond with Imarufe Bisurupeguze entirely of your own volition! This *demands* punishment, even for you, Shinichi!”

The empress was irate. I had never seen her like this, practically jumping off her throne with anger.

She was flanked by Prime Minister Zahar and Garius. I guess they both pretty much shared Petralka’s opinion of the situation, because neither of them said anything to stop her.

That left us only one option—

“I’m sorry...”

“You have my sincere apologies.”

“I’m really, really sorry...”

—abject apology.

All of us had gone pale—including Lauron. For her, being subject to the empress’s anger had to be like getting yelled at by God.

Actually, there was one of us who wasn’t pale. Hikaru-san, who’d had nothing to do with the entire Imarufe Bisurupeguze incident, stood there watching the rest of us with exasperation, as if this was no concern of his. Which, I guess, it wasn’t. He was only here because he had been with us right up until all this happened.

“For the love of...” Petralka seemed to have shouted herself out somewhat; now she heaved a deep sigh and settled back on her throne. “You need not have simply made off with the weapon. If you had spoken to us, we could have found a way to help you.”

“Everything was happening in such a rush... I didn’t feel like there was time to talk.”

“And if you had been cut down by knights who mistook your intentions?”

“Huh...? Er...”

She had me there. Imarufe Bisurupeguze had originally been brought in by terrorists—by the Assembly of Patriots. So what I had done, in effect, was to break into a military base and walk out with a weapon of mass destruction confiscated from those very terrorists. If any guardsmen had seen me, I couldn’t have blamed them for stabbing first and asking questions later.

“Again. Very, very sorry...”

Petralka was still glaring at me.

“But, look. I’m the one who did it. I sort of pushed Lauron into going along with me, and Minori-san felt she didn’t have any choice, being my bodyguard and all... So, uh, if you have to get angry at someone, I’d appreciate if you’d get angry at just... me...”

“Shinichi!” Petralka snapped.

I straightened up in a hurry. “Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“You truly understand nothing,” she said, almost in a sigh.

“Huh? What don’t I—”

“Time and again, you take it upon yourself to do things that cause such worry for those around you...”

“Petralka...?”

Whoa. Wait a second.

Why was her voice so thick? She almost sounded like she was going to cry.

Petralka furrowed her eyebrows and bit her lip. Her clenched fist trembled, and those big eyes of hers started to get moist...

“Huh? I-I’m sorry! Um, er, P-Petralka, please don’t cry!”

“We would never!” she declared as she vigorously rubbed her eyes with her hands.

Yikes... What was I supposed to do now? Making a girl cry was bad enough, but making an *empress* cry...?

“Your Majesty.” Kneeling beside Petralka and gently offering her a handkerchief was Garius. Then he got back to his feet and looked at us. “You may have stolen Imarufe Bisurupeguze, but the fact remains that thanks to your actions, the threat was eliminated. Considering that we did grant the JDSF a free hand in this situation, it has been decided, after much discussion, not to punish the parties involved.”

In other words, since Minori-san had been with me, they had chosen to view the whole thing not as my work, but as falling within the anti-disaster measures the JSDF had been permitted to take, and I was to avoid punishment.

I let out a breath of real relief.

“The matter of the storeroom, however, will warrant investigation,” Garius said. “Even those favored by Her Majesty should not be able to prance in and out of it so readily.” His expression was firm. It seemed to say that they would let me off this time, but there wasn’t to be a repeat.

Believe me, sir, I understand.

“You may be interested to know,” Prime Minister Zahar put in, “that subsequent study has revealed the reason the number of sprites dropped so low.”

“What? Really?” I asked.

The Prime Minister nodded. “It seems some of the sprites had escaped to the other side.”

“The other side?”

“Your world,” Petralka said, still rubbing her eyes. “Through the... what was it? Hy-perr-space tunnel.”

I was struck speechless with surprise. Minori-san and Hikaru-san looked almost as shocked as I was. Maybe I’d had an inkling, but...

“Some of the magical power and sprites seem to have gone through the tunnel into your world,” Petralka said. “You have said there is no magic where you come from, haven’t you? Perhaps it’s unsurprising, then, that some such would flow through an open door.”

“But that...”

Surely that meant they would have to close off the hyperspace wormhole. And that meant no more connection with Japan. That was, if they even knew how to close the portal. Did we understand it well enough to even do that?

“In order to prevent the further escape of these forces, we’ve had the entrance closed for the time being. That should solve the problem for now.”

“Closed...?”

So Japan and Eldant really were cut off?

What—for real?! Hey! I needed some time to mentally prepare...!

“Ah,” Petralka said, shaking her head when she spotted my distress. “Only temporarily.”

“Wha?”

“A lid has been placed over the hole. That should allow us to prevent the further hemorrhage of magical power. On reflection, we believe we have been too laissez-faire in the past. The hole has been protected by a fence and a small guardhouse, but that has been it. It’s time proper facilities were built to oversee it.”

Petralka and Zahar between them informed me that for the time being the portal was being blocked off by a sort of “atmospheric lid,” but that in the future, a cover—or maybe more of a gate—would be created to prevent the actual escape of magical power.

Honestly, I had just kind of assumed that physical barriers wouldn’t have been an impediment to magical energy. So many fantasy works had taught me to think that way. But I guess if you could build a lamp that had sprites in it, or a “magic tank” like Lauron carried, or for that matter a weapon like Imarufe Bisurupeguze—all of them demonstrated that Eldant technology was capable of containing magical energy within a specific space. So why shouldn’t they be able to prevent it from flowing away? Maybe they could keep another episode like this from happening.

“So... everyone’s safe now, is what you’re saying?”

“Mm.” Petralka nodded.

I was just heaving another sigh of relief, when—

“Therefore, Shinichi, do not take matters so lightly into your own hands again. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am...”

My shoulders slumped as Petralka glared at me once again.

Several days later. Classes were over for the day, and we were at Eldant Castle, in the body-double training room. It had taken things in the castle some time to settle down after all the excitement, the upshot being that it had been quite a while since we'd worked with the doll. For that reason, we were all there today: me and Minori-san, Myusel, and Hikaru-san, along with Loek and Romilda.

Lauron, apparently still arriving ten minutes early, greeted us when we got the room. Well, it wasn't such a bad thing for her to follow her rules, as long as they didn't suffocate her life. Probably. I thought.

Also with us that day was Petralka, who was between public duties.

"Okay, let's get started," I said, and Lauron began the training. As a warm-up, we had her imitate Petralka's movements with the doll. It copied the empress's every motion, as if she were standing by a mirror.

But now came the hard part.

"Okay, now I want just Lauron to do it."

"Yes, sir." Lauron nodded—then moved from the wall, where she'd had a clear view of Petralka, to the middle of the room.

Petralka herself came and stood next to me.

Lauron and the Petralka doll were left in the center of the room, encircled by the rest of us. Lauron took a single deep breath—to calm herself down? To focus? I wasn't sure—and then she extended her hands in the direction of the double and slowly began to chant.

"*Ia ma esu reruu fo esu surae ruree fo esu kou ruree fo nori zurou fo suruto esu shisabu fo iteirosua ia riu redoro ti shi irarobumetto eshiirupu uorofu imu suredoro.*" *I take upon myself the True Words and the rights of the Chieftain of Earth...*

And as we watched, the Petralka doll gradually started to move.

It lifted its arms, which had been hanging limply at its sides, and put its hands one on top of the other in front of its body, so that it looked downright regal. I'd told her earlier to do this, so it wasn't really a sign that Lauron had figured out Petralka for herself.

But it was a little different from when she had mechanically imitated someone else's actions. And that was a sign that she was growing, too.

I cocked my head in the direction of the double. "Think you could stand a little more, you know, self-importantly?"

"Self-importantly...?" Lauron cocked her own head in return.

“Yeah, like... Cross your arms, stick the right foot out a little bit.”

“What is this about self-importance, Shinichi?” Petralka grumbled at my instructions. I guess she really didn’t know how she came across...

“We have to exaggerate things with the doll, Your Majesty,” Hikaru-san broke in, smoothing things over. I was grateful.

“Hrm...” Petralka still didn’t sound thrilled, but she didn’t complain anymore, either; she just leaned against the wall to see how this would go.

Lauron moved her hands a little. The figure changed its posture accordingly. Crossed its arms, stuck its right foot out a little bit. And it pulled its chin in just a tad, as if looking imperiously down at somebody...

“Ooh!” I found myself exclaiming. For the first time, the way Lauron moved the double looked Petralka-ish without Petralka serving as a model.

Everyone else looked impressed, too. There were wide eyes all around.

“Can you have it walk over and sit in the chair?”

“Yes, sir.”

I moved a chair from a spot near the wall so it was closer to the Petralka doll. Then I stepped back again, and Lauron started the doll moving.

Before, Lauron would just cry when I gave her instructions like that...

For a second, I worried about what I would do if she burst into tears again, but the Petralka doll didn’t seem to be aware of my concerns; it started walking easily. It strutted to the chair like a model, then sat down and crossed its legs. The edges of its lips turned up ever so slightly, at once adorable and yet imposing, like it was about to make some royal demand.

“How’s that?” Lauron asked us.

“I think that’s really good,” I said, and everyone nodded.

Not perfect, not yet; and she was doing it in response to detailed instructions—but just the same, she hadn’t needed to imitate Petralka directly. Lauron was putting her own spin on things.

Like when I had said “a little more self-importantly.” I had told her what attitude I wanted, but it was Lauron who figured out how to show it.

“But why the sudden change?” Hikaru-san asked, tilting his head.

“I’ve been thinking a lot,” Lauron said with the ghost of a smile. “What Shinichi-sensei said... It got me thinking. I’ve always been so sure that I have to do certain things, be a certain way. Otherwise, I might make a mistake I can’t take back.”

Loek and Romilda looked at each other, thoroughly perplexed. Huh. I

guess they never had heard the story behind Lauron's scrupulous behavior.

"But then we saved everybody by stealing Imarufe Bisurupeguze. That made me realize... by setting up rules to follow, I'd been running away from thinking for myself."

Then, she smiled. She wasn't copying this smile from anyone else—it welled up from her own heart.

"That's great," I said, returning Lauron's smile.

"I'm going to go through the motions you taught me," Lauron said. "If there's anything wrong with them, please let me know." As she spoke, the Petralka figure got to its feet. It twirled in place, then picked up the hem of its dress as it did a curtsy.

"Awesome, that's great!" I said, impressed by the smooth movements of our "second" Petralka. Heartened by my praise, the doll smiled, then placed the back of its right hand against its cheek and burst out, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" in a high-pitched gale of laughter.

"Hah, it sounds just like her!"

I had never actually heard the real Petralka laugh like that, but it had such plausibility! Every "li'l aristocrat" should laugh like that once in a while!

"W-We do not do such things!" Petralka exclaimed from beside me, the only one to look annoyed at the doll's display.

"You have to admit, though, it's in character."

"Such is not our concern! We insist that our laughter is more refined and elegant!"

"Refined, elegant laughter, huh? I'm trying to remember if I've ever heard that from you..."

"Shinichi!" Petralka glared at me. Then she turned to Lauron, pointing a finger at her accusingly. "And you, Lauron! Why would you cause the doll to do something simply because this *moron* demands it?"

"Ah... I'm very s—"

"Starting tomorrow, you shall enter our service as a lady in waiting! You must be able to imitate us without any help from Shinichi, or certainly from ourself—so observe us closely! You understand?"

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty!" Lauron nodded vigorously, with just a touch of panic.

Well, this was just Petralka's way of doing something I had already

asked her to do. We had decided it would be best if Lauron could get a feel for Petralka's behavior and personality up close.

"Wait..." It took a moment for the full impact of Petralka's command to sink in for Lauron. But when it did, a look of absolute shock spread over her face.

"Then you shall truly make the doll resemble us!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Lauron responded happily.

Before, she had always done her work mechanically, hardly even showing much emotion. Now... now, it was clear how thrilled she was to be doing this job.

I had her start working the doll again. As I watched it walk smoothly around the room, chin up, the very picture of a well-bred young noble, I had a thought.

Maybe the day when Lauron and this doll can help make Petralka's life easier isn't so far away.

□□□□□

To Be Cont'd...

Afterword

Hullo! Light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 8 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

Petralka's on the cover this time. Twice! (How's that work?) She hasn't had a good way to take a very active role in the last few volumes' stories, so I'm trying to set things up here with an eye for the future. And look where we find ourselves (reference the illustrations)!

It was just before a certain broadcast on Nico Live. Three of us (myself, the illustrator, and the editor) were having a conference at a certain family restaurant.

"Ahem. There seems to be a distinct lack of Myusel in this volume. Do you think that's okay?" (says editor-san.)

"I really think it's going to be fine," my dear illustrator Yuugen-san broke in. I'm pretty sure I can see what he means now. I think.

And then there's the anime. Yes, the anime!

As I write this (October 2013), the first episode of the series has aired, with the second coming up soon. Being, technically, part of the creative staff, I've already had the privilege of seeing episode two in the blanks (the video files sent to the people involved prior to broadcast), and the director's personal style is abundantly in evidence.

Outbreak Company doesn't really have big fight scenes in every volume; dramatic conversation is one of the series' selling points. But that's actually tough to pull off in an anime. The director, the sound designer, the actors—all these people's sensibilities have a major influence on the final product, so it can be tricky to create something coherent. I get the impression, though, that the anime strikes a good balance with the character dialogue.

By the way, on the subject of Petralka, the final moments of episode 1, where Shinichi takes a royal uppercut, are well-animated and adorable (Yuugen-shi also recommends them), so if you haven't seen it, then please, by all means. Listen carefully and you'll hear some wild ad-libbing by

Fuchigami-san, too... (grin)

The actual content is what it is, but we've tried to screw around with things a little. Keep your eyes peeled as you watch. There was one particular scene where Shinichi starts chanting "*Nou-kan! Nou-kan!*" and because I hadn't seen the anime of that specific series, I actually didn't know what he was referring to. I was sitting there thinking, *What?!*

Miki Shinichirou-shi's work as Garius in episode 4 is completely nuts—I mean that in the best possible way—and you've got to check it out. An assistant on *Outbreak Company* and I happened to get to attend a looping session for that episode, and Kajiya Kiri-san, who does the manga, was there too. The three of us were standing there in the studio listening to "MikiShin" and trying to laugh as quietly as we possibly could.

This is actually the third time I've worked with Miki-san—and both other times he was the main character of the series in question. So I came into this one thinking, *Is it okay to make* the *Miki Shinichirou play a side character like this?* But he showed me what it means to be a veteran, someone who doesn't sniff at any character he gets to play (laugh).

Actually, there are enough familiar faces involved in making *Outbreak* that sometimes I have to stop and remind myself which show we're working on.

Let's see here. I worked with the producers (feel.) and the sound designer on *Strait Jacket*. Pony Canyon produced *Shinkyoku Soukai Polyphonica*. I already mentioned Miki-san, whom I worked with on *Strait Jacket* and *Scrapped Princess*.

Somehow this is all very strange.

Speaking of the anime, I've been charged with doing a special short story, as well as the script for a drama CD that will accompany Volume 9. Both of them, especially the drama CD, feature the sorts of wildly overdone plots that you can only do in anime, or at least that you definitely can't get away with in the main series. So, uh, hope you like?

Okay, then. That's enough anime talk; let's move on to the book. Spoilers follow, so if you haven't finished the story yet, you may want to go back and do that.

Volume 8... the otaku hook here has to do with action figures or dolls (remember that the Japanese word for "doll" and "puppet" is the same). I imagined the moving figures as looking a bit like something produced by

MMD Software—you know, the thing that gives us Hatsune Miku.

Only beginners and the uninitiated assume that because something is in 3D, you can make it look real just by having it move. There are real differences between how a living thing moves and how a lifeless thing trying to imitate a living thing needs to move—it's a fake, right? So it has to look more real than real; you need this sort of X factor.

I'm thinking this is sort of like the realism of the novels and images I allude to on Twitter and in my books.

Just as a note, there are some details in this book that contradict what's in the anime and manga versions. (Stuff like how Imarufe Bisurupeguze is handled, the connection between sprite-like beings and magical energy, and so on.) That's on me—or more to the point, I didn't write the plot for this volume until after the plot for the anime and the rough panel layout for the manga were already finished. So I was behind the curve and ended up contradicting the other versions.

I'm very sorry to all my no-doubt-concerned readers and supporters.

Still, each of the versions is internally consistent, so if you could just smile and wink, that would be great.

So, what's coming up next?

I've got the plot for Volumes 9 and 10 in hand (submitted to and approved by my editor). They'll essentially form a two-parter, and they'll feature a character (?) that readers have been very interested in. At last. Although I'm not promising this character will necessarily get the limelight or anything.

As for the actual story, it's something I think a lot of you have been anticipating for quite a while. *You* know.

Hope you like it.

Welp, see you next time.

Ichiro Sakaki
9 Oct 2013

Bonus Translator’s Notes

Chapter One

Universal Century

The mech identification codes are all Gundam references.

Yandere

A yandere is a girl who is loving and sweet until it turns out she's actually possessive and crazy. The specific scene in this volume appears to reference *Mirai Nikki* (*Future Diary*).

Kappa

A Japanese water demon. Its head has a depression on top filled with water; if you can trick the kappa into bowing, the water will pour out and the monster won't be able to move. They are also usually depicted with short, bowl-style haircuts, which is the detail Shinichi has in mind here.

"A *Kawaii*-ness All its Own"

In Japanese, Shinichi uses the word *kyuuto* (cute) in katakana, so we figured turnabout was fair play.

Cross-Dresser

Jp. otoko no ko. When written with the characters for "male child," the phrase otoko no ko simply means "boy." However, some Japanese cross-dressers replace the character "child" (ko) with a different one meaning "daughter" or "girl" (also pronounced *ko*) as a play on words.

Cour

While Western TV series are usually divided into "seasons," and the term is sometimes informally used to refer to sets of episodes of an anime series, the technical term "cour" (apparently derived from the French word for "course") is more precise. A cour is usually thirteen episodes.

Weapons Systems Don't Have Jugulars

The Japanese expression, *mi mo futa mo nai*, literally means "to have no body [i.e., container] and no lid," and idiomatically means "point-blank,"

“blunt.” So Shinichi accuses Minori’s declaration of being *mi mo futa mo nai* (too blunt), to which Minori replies that weapons systems have no containers (*mi*) or lids (*futa*).

About to *Attack*

The reference is to *Attack on Titan*, which is called *Shingeki no Kyojin* (literally, “Attacking Titan”) in Japanese. Shinichi suggests that the robot might be about to “*shingeki*” (assault, attack). This makes the Japanese allusion perhaps a bit more clear than the English one; we compensated by using the word “titan” in the next sentence.

Ultman**

That is, Ultraman. This character’s face is clearly humanoid, but lacks much in the way of facial features, which is the point at issue.

Lauron Selioz

Jp. *Roron Seriozu*. The Japanese sound usually romanized with an *r* is really somewhere between an *r* and an *l*, and when to use one letter or the other when localizing a character’s name can be a thorny problem. In this case, we took the name as being akin to “Lauren” and romanized accordingly.

Garaham

Jp. *Garahamu*. Sounds much like the English/Germanic name Graham —which means “gravel” in its oldest form.

Elementary-Schooler Backpacks

Elementary-schoolers (*shougakusei*) in Japan all wear distinctive red backpacks.

Otome Game

A visual novel aimed at women (that is, most of the romantic prospects are guys).

Boys Over Flowers

We very rarely take it upon ourselves to insert references that aren’t in

the original, but in this case we took the liberty. This reference actually ends up being a bit dizzying to contemplate. The original expression *hana yori dango* ("Dango [rice balls] over flowers") means to prefer the practical to the merely aesthetic; the manga series of the same name punned on the expression to mean "Boys over flowers," and now we're using the English translation of the Japanese pun in the manga title with the understanding that "flowers" means girls. But we kind of love it for that.

Kagemusha

Literally "shadow warrior," this term refers to a body double employed by a feudal daimyo, as Shinichi suggests. Like he hints, it's also the title of a well-known movie by Kurosawa Akira.

Isukiri

A particular town in Aomori (a prefecture in northern Honshu) contains a tombstone alleged to be the burial place of Jesus Christ. Historically, people in the area have believed in the legend Shinichi describes: that it wasn't Jesus who died on the cross, but his younger brother Isukiri (a name transparently derived from Iesu Kirisuto, the Japanese equivalent of "Jesus Christ"). Jesus himself escaped through Siberia and wound up in Aomori, where he lived out the rest of his life.

Teachers' Room

That is, the *shokuinshitsu* (staff room). Every Japanese school has one of these, so although it hasn't really been mentioned before, it makes sense that Shinichi's school, which is explicitly built on the Japanese model, has one as well. Each teacher at the school has a desk in the staff room where they can keep their papers and supplies and prepare for lessons. Teachers can generally be found in the staff room when not teaching; students may be summoned to the staff room to see a teacher or may go there of their own volition if they need something from a particular sensei.

Fig*a

That is, Figma, a brand of Japanese figures renowned for its highly articulated models.

Mike-mike Osuwari

Most likely a reference to *Minami-ke Okawari*, the second season of the anime *Minami-ke*. The show was about a family named the Minamis (the word *minami* means "south"), and the character Shinichi refers to has the surname Kita, which means "north." ("*Okawari*" means "seconds," whereas "*osuwari*" means "sit!", as in a command you would give a dog.)

Faerie Field

This is a fun one: □□□□□□□□□□ (*Fearii Fiirudo*), featuring a character named Serris, is a light novel (not a video game) by... Sakaki Ichiro. In the Japanese here, he's "changed" the name by rendering it as □□ □□□□□□□□, handling the final vowel of the first word with a second *i* character instead of a long-vowel dash. There's no official English version of this series, but we thought it would be more likely to be called *Fairy Field*, so we similarly changed the (hypothetical) spelling of the first word somewhat.

A Certain Such-and-Such Savior Legend

This is a *Fist of the North Star* reference. It seems to allude to the video game *Hokuto no Ken Seiki-matsu Kyuuseishu Densetsu* (*Fist of the North Star: Turn-of-the-Century Savior Legend*).

The Epic of a Certain Meiji-era Swordsman

This is a reference to *Rurouni Kenshin*, which had the subtitle □□□□□□ (*Meiji Kenkaku Roman-tan*) or "Romantic Tales of a Meiji Swordsman" in Japanese. (The elaborate subtitle doesn't seem to have been carried over in the English release of the manga.) There's a sequence late in the manga (spoiler alert—it wasn't in the anime) where Kaoru is killed—but it later transpires that the thing Kenshin saw "die" was actually an elaborate doll, and Kaoru is okay.

Kurobe Dam

An actual dam in Japan that is a popular tourist destination. It doesn't appear to have any currency as a pop-culture metaphor, so it seems Shinichi is only referencing it because it's well known.

“It—It Gets Lonely, Does It Not?”

In Japanese Petralka says simply, “*Sa—Sabishii, dewa nai ka*” (“L-Lonely, no?”). Because an explicit subject isn’t usually necessary in Japanese, she can leave it artfully ambiguous who she’s talking about. She might be referring to herself—but then, maybe she’s talking about Shinichi, or even just a general atmosphere.

Bittersweetness

Amazuppai (bittersweet) can refer to a flavor, but also means the sweet-but-also-bitter pangs of adolescent love.

Chapter Two

Prepure

A reference to the *Precure* franchise and a show that Shinichi has mentioned before.

A Passionately Celebrated Hero

Shinichi describes Brooke as an "*atsui*" *rizaadoman no eiyuu* ("hot" lizardman hero); *atsui* here, considering the highlight quotes, is probably an incidental pun on lizards being cold-blooded. (In Japanese, the word *atsui*, or "hot," can be used to mean "passionate" or what we might call, ironically, "hot-blooded.")

Slutty Bottom

Jp. *sasoi-uke*, that is, an uke who takes the initiative in beginning a sexual encounter (the Japanese literally means "inviting bottom"). There doesn't seem to be an equivalent English expression, and although the Japanese term has some currency in English fandom, in this scene it's specifically being contrasted with *sou-uke* (total bottom), which we translated when it appeared in Minori's lesson many volumes ago, so we wanted to maintain the English usage.

The Ending Song from *Prepure*

The *Precure* anime has something of a tradition of ending sequences that use CGI to create convincing renditions of the animated characters doing song-and-dance routines. It's easy enough to find clips and compilations of them on YouTube if you want to see the sort of thing Lauron is probably watching.

Overwork

The Japanese term *karoushi* literally means "death from overwork," and that's what it describes: someone who has worked so hard that they reach their physical limit and die (such as from a heart attack or stroke). In Japan, it's especially associated with the bubble economy of the 1980s, when many office workers kept absurdly long hours; however, it remains an issue

today in Japan's work-conscious society.

Magical Rampage

Jp. *mahou no bousou*. This expression is associated with the *Dragon Quest* games, and refers to a random phenomenon where a spell will be more powerful than normal when used.

Yodeling in the Alps

A reference to the 1974 anime *Arupusu no Shoujo Haiji*, or *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*. Notably, the series was directed by Studio Ghibli founder Takahata Isao.

"Dutch Wi—"

I.e., Dutch wife, in this case, a body pillow or sex doll. The reference to "the passenger seats of cars" relates to how some people allegedly use inflatable dolls to make it look like there are more passengers in their cars than there really are, allowing them to use the quicker carpool lanes to avoid rush-hour traffic.

Minori's Posture

The way Minori leans on the table with her fingers steepled in front of her face is a direct reference to a posture frequently adopted by Ikari Gendou in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The narration and dialogue that follow both contain multiple allusions to the same show.

Chapter Three

Japan's Educational System

Education in Japan often relies on a good deal of rote memorization—something that's hard to avoid when your written language consists of thousands of distinct characters, but which can (critics allege) stifle the development of independent creative thought when extended to the rest of the curriculum. That's the criticism Hikaru is alluding to in this discussion: the focus on memorization over understanding.

Goethe or Heine

Johann Goethe (1749–1832) was a German writer and thinker whose work encompassed a dizzying variety of fields and subjects. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) was a poet, among other things, who leveled a good deal of sarcasm at the romantic movement that gripped poetry around the time of his life.

We Have No Choice but to Die!

A line from *Madoka Magica*. In Japan, the line ("*Shinu shika nai ja nai!*") became the basis for a number of memes.

More *Yan-* than *-Dere*

Again, a yandere is an archetypical character (usually a girl) in anime, who is in love with the main character (that's the *-dere* part), but also has a tendency to inflict severe physical violence on him (that's the *yan-*).

Disaster Relief

As we've noted in the past, the Japan Self-Defense Force is very limited in the specifically military activities it's allowed to undertake. Peaceful operations, however, are allowed, and the JSDF is frequently deployed in response to natural disasters, somewhat in the way the Coast Guard is used in the US.

Auto-Changer

In Japanese, the power is called *jidou shokubai* (auto-catalyst), and

glossed with the katakana *ooto cheinjaa*.

Chapter Four

“My Name Isn’t Bunny...”

The reference is to *Tiger & Bunny*, which is frequently characterized as a “buddy hero (*baddii hiiro*) action” show on the Japanese internet.

The Sandman

The Japanese version of the Sandman is the *suima* (□□), composed of the character for sleep and the character denoting a magical being. In Japanese Shinichi literally says Myusel seemed to be “fighting an especially vicious *suima*/sleep spirit.”

Bombing Hurricanes

This is something that has actually been proposed in the past as a way of averting especially bad storms. As Shinichi remarks, though, a hurricane simply contains too much energy for it to be neutralized by any reasonable amount of weaponry. (That’s not even to mention the potential problem of fallout when using nuclear bombs.)

What Do You Want to Do?

This entire line comes from an episode of *Gundam Unicorn*.

Byarnt Custom**

The Byarlant Custom, a powerful Mobile Suit from the same series.

110mm LAM

LAM is short for Loitering Attack Munition, a system in which the weapon (such as a drone) stays in one area (that is, loiters) until it finds a suitable target, which it then attacks. As Shinichi says, this was also referenced during the sequence in Bahairam in Volume 5.

People Seem to Get Stronger During a Crisis

Just as a point of interest, the Japanese for this is *kajiba no baka-jikara*, literally “outrageous strength at the scene of a fire.” The image is of someone doing something extraordinary in the face of a raging inferno,

equivalent to the proverbial mom lifting a car off her child.

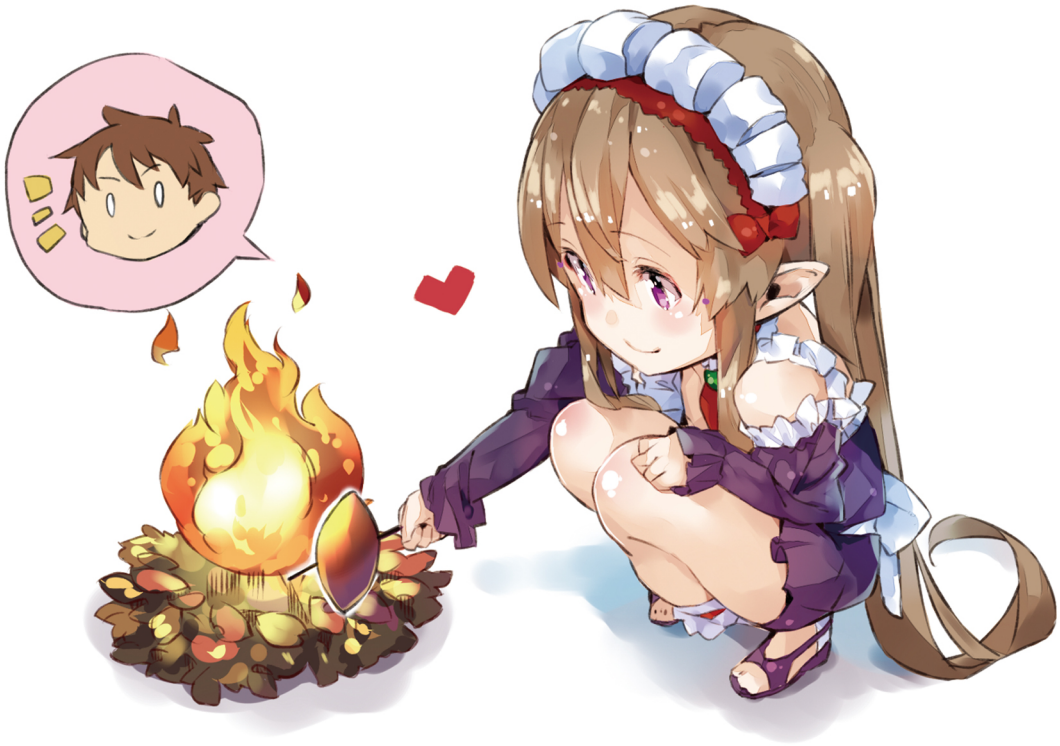
Atmospheric Lid

□□□□ (*kuuki no futa*, “air lid”) in Japanese. This appears to be an invented term. Perhaps it involves the toilet mages creating a wind phenomenon that prevents sprites from escaping.

Afterword

Nou-kan! Nou-kan!

A reference to the anime version of the series *Tobaku Mokushiroku Kaiji*, a story about gamblers which we’ve encountered in these notes before.



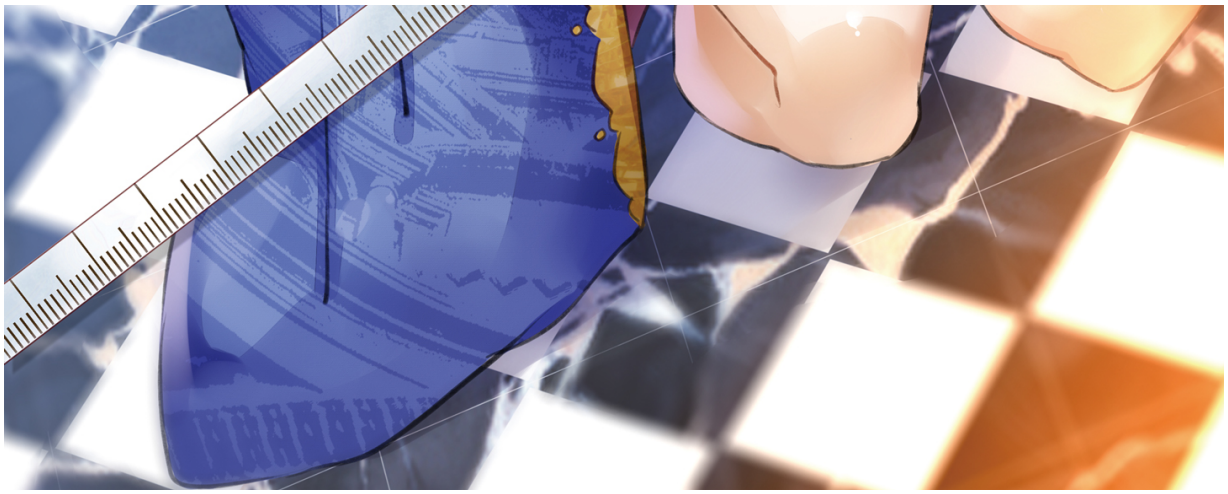


Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter One: A Royal Replica?

Chapter Two: A Puppet Master?

Chapter Three: Her Own Rules?

Chapter Four: Vanishing Magic?

Afterword
Bonus Translator's Notes

Bonus Textless Illustrations
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Outbreak Company: Volume 8
by Ichiro Sakaki

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Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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